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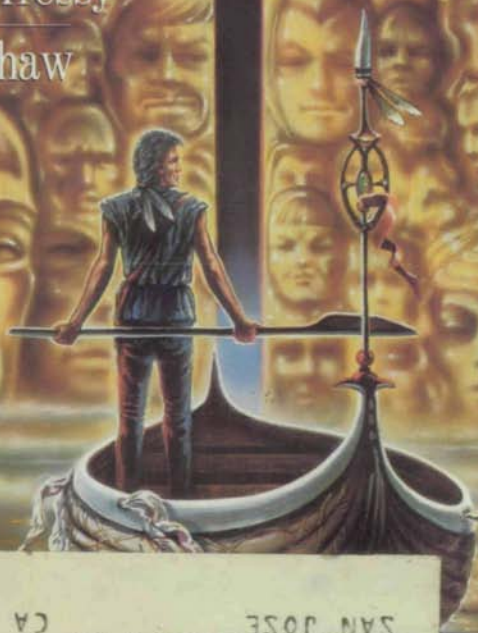
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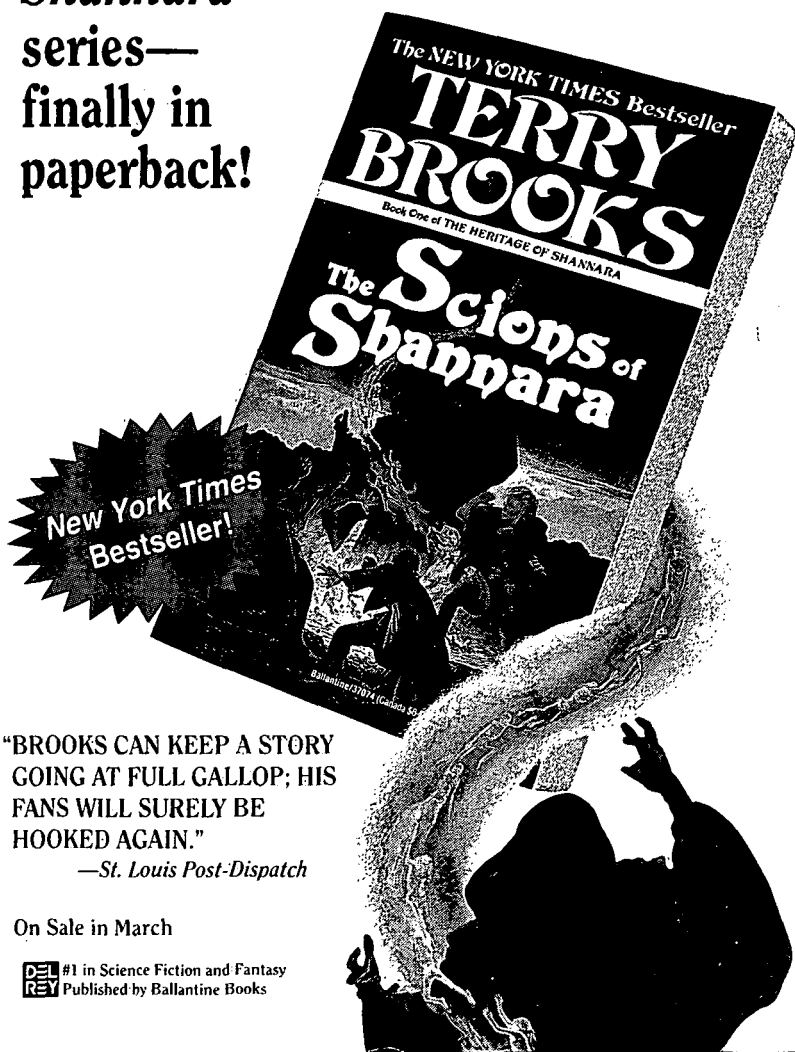
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NOVELETS

HER WILD WILD EYES	6	Brad Strickland
GATE OF FACES	125	Ray Aldridge

SHORT STORIES

THE LIBERATOR	35	John Morressy
STIGMATA	49	Wendy Counsil
LUNCH OF CHAMPIONS	58	Bob Shaw
ILLNESS IN A WORD	70	R.P. Bird
THE NEGLECTED GARDEN	76	Kathe Koja
MUMMERS	84	Robert Frazier
STRANGER IN THE GREEN CHAIR	102	Michael Lee

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	26	Algis Budrys
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	31	Orson Scott Card
SCIENCE: Skimming the Nearest	115	Isaac Asimov

CARTOONS: H. MARTIN (101), S. HARRIS (162)
COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "GATE OF FACES"

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 80, No. 4, Whole No. 479, Apr. 1991. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at \$2.50 per copy. Annual subscription \$26.00; \$31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1991 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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HER WILD WILD EYES

By Brad Strickland

R

AYMOND KINGSLEY
met her the night of the
slashing.

He had left the studio after the deed was done, had gone out into the hot dark streets to walk and brood and curse his fate. It was not a neighborhood for nightwalking: even at 2:00 A.M., trios and quartets of young men congregated on the street corners, smoking, jiving, scattering hoots of laughter, casting furtive eyes his way. Kingsley was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, to be secure.

Early on, a man from one of the streetlamp groups actually broke away and approached him, speaking in a voice sweet and soft as molasses: "I gotcha, man. Got what you need, right here —"

Without speaking, Kingsley waved him off. The man stopped, his dark eyes going round. "Hey, O.K., man, shit —" He backed away, shaking his head and muttering, "It's cool, it's O.K." He went back to the others, and they watched Kingsley silently as he strode away. A few blocks farther

along, Kingsley noticed the stickiness on the base of his thumb, and under a streetlight, he saw the crimson palm he had showed the pusher. He had been caught red-handed, as it were. In this part of town, that color could mean only one thing.

No wonder the kid backed off, he thought, carelessly scrubbing his hand against his jeans, feeling the half-dried acrylic paint peel away, smelling the plastic scent of it, cloying on the humid night air.

His walk had taken him past closed Korean groceries and open, dimly lighted bodegas, past doorways spilling the aroma of whiskey or the sound of salsa, to a place where the street ended in a narrow alley between two buildings, an asphalted bluff overlooking the riverfront. Kingsley stood in a patch of dry weeds at the end of the street where a chest-high barrier kept traffic from spilling over into the stream. Looking out across the black water, he saw the lighted towers and spires of the city.

Once upon a time, someone like Raymond Kingsley, an aspiring artist, would have lived in that great city, even if it were in a garret, and he would have enjoyed the bohemian company of other starving servants of the muse. No more. Rents were too high, space too dear, and the world had turned on.

There's a picture, Kingsley thought, staring at the night city, smelling the garbage reek of alleyways, the dead-fish stench of the stale water below, hearing the faraway electronic shrieks of sirens, mad laughter leaking from an asylum of 8 million. He flexed his right hand, feeling the remnants of the crimson paint, sticky and warm.

He bent his elbows and rested them on the guardrail, hearing the summer-withered weeds crackle underfoot. His eyes caught the thousand shimmering colors shining in the lights of the high concrete towers, dancing in the leftover heat of the August day. It was almost a painting complete in itself, needing no artist's touch to make it art. *Almost.*

"God damn," he said sincerely, directing the thought at himself.

"You could paint it."

For a vertiginous moment, Kingsley thought the voice was in his head, conjured by imagination: feminine, soft, breathy. Then he turned and peered through the darkness and saw her.

The streetlight down the block defined her, shone from behind her to halo her cascading blonde hair, to make her bare shoulders gleam, to lose itself in her black dress. Looking at her, Kingsley had the odd impression

that she was the center of the night, that darkness flowed in toward her, black water spiraling down an endless drain: everything else seemed obscured by her presence. *She draws the light into herself*, he thought.

But that was not wholly true, for her golden hair had captured the light, and the highlight on her neck was a graceful long S, and her face —

Her face was almost self-luminous, like a pale moon shining through a layer of cloud.

"You could paint it," she said again. She stood perhaps twenty feet away from Kingsley, her arms at her sides, her left leg straight, her right just a little bent. He felt himself pulled toward her, drawn on the tide of night.

"That's the trouble," he said. "I can't." His attempted laugh was miserable, a cough of despair. He took a few steps toward her.

She was shorter than he had thought; as he came close, she tilted her chin to look up at him. "You're an artist."

"I've been known to call myself that." He shivered, though the night was still heavy with summer heat. "I don't remember seeing you in the neighborhood —"

She ignored the invitation to name herself. "I know you, though. You are capable of great things . . . Ray."

There was something about her voice. Despite her knowing his name, she did not sound familiar; no, the quality of her speech was not familiarity, but rather, strangeness. Kingsley realized that her voice carried no accent, no geographical quality. And yet it was soothing, musical, lilting almost.

Striving to recognize her, he stared intently into her face, the features just visible in the lightscatter from the city. She had high cheekbones and a mouth well defined, probably red, but looking black in the shadows. Her eyes were wide and very dark, though he could not tell their color. He laughed again, no more successfully this time than the first.

"Did I say something funny?" she asked without a trace of the smile.

"One funny word. Capable. I used to think that I was. Tomorrow, though — no, forget it."

She tilted her head. "Forget what?"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow I've got to take the subway into town and see the art director at Helios Press and tell him I can't do the cover for *Mother Kali*. So I don't get the check I was counting on. So I'll be evicted sometime next month. Not much."

"Mother Kali?"

He looked away. The fairy city burned on the other side of the river, and its reflection jeweled the dark water. "Science fiction novel," he said. "You've heard of Penelope Lowell?" When the woman did not respond, Kingsley continued: "Well, anyway, she started as a science fiction writer, then hit big as a mainstream novelist. Stories in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*. You know the book *Female Trouble*? Best-seller last year? That was hers. This new book, *Mother Kali*, is her return to the field, and the Helios limited edition will be her first science fiction novel in ten years. I lucked into the assignment. Now I'm losing it." He paused. "I don't know why I'm babbling."

He felt her hands on his arm, soft pressure, a childlike tug. "You're not babbling. I'm interested. Take me to see."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't want you to look at them. Or anybody else, for that matter."

"What's wrong?"

"The work's no good. I don't have it."

"What?" Somehow she was close to him, her breath right in his face, warm and sweetly scented, a honey-and-ginger sort of fragrance. "What don't you have?"

"Damned if I know. Whatever artists have to have," he said, his voice going ragged. A car came toward them, and he pulled her from the street onto the sidewalk. In the glare of the headlights, he saw her eyes were deep blue, the color of midnight, and her lips as red as blood. "What I'm lacking is talent. Inspiration. Whatever the hell it takes. I've lied to myself for five years, but the truth is, I'm no artist."

She did not reply. He swept his hand toward the city. "You said I could paint that. I can't. I can *see* the painting in it; I can even sense what it should feel like — but if I put it on canvas, it would be dead. Perfectly composed, but dead — like a funeral-parlor corpse. Like the dead paintings hanging in my studio now."

She pulled his arm again, gently insisting. "Come. Take me." He caught himself hearing an entirely different invitation in her words, one he could not dismiss.

Because she made him less alone, because he could not make himself believe that she meant only what the surface of her words said, he did take her to the studio. She expressed no surprise at the building, which a

hundred years ago had been a modest warehouse for tobacco shipped north from Virginia, and now was all but derelict. She had nothing at all to say about his top-story living quarters (three brick-walled rooms, all still smelling faintly of tobacco: bathroom, kitchen/sleeping area, and a long, high-ceilinged room with a northern tier of windows running its entire length). She showed no dismay at its untidiness or its fusty smell of ripe garbage, oils, and acrylics. She did cry out, very softly, when she saw the remnants of his slashed paintings.

"They were no good," he said, leaning against the windows: "Nothing I've done in the past five years is any damn good." He nodded at a set of panels on the floor against the south wall. "Some of the early stuff, the student works, had a glimmer. But nothing since I came to the city."

"You were married?"

He shook his head, smiling. "Never. Well, once, sort of; it lasted nearly a year, but we didn't have a ceremony or anything. And she's living abroad now."

"Long ago?"

"Seems like it. I last saw her, let's see, three years ago in October. She threw a party for my twenty-fifth birthday and told me the next morning that she had to leave, sorry, we all have to grow, blah, blah, blah. You don't want to hear this."

Lisbet raised a mischievous eyebrow. "You think not?" She wandered the length of the studio, fingering ripped canvas, her neat, small feet in their black pumps crunching broken composition-board panels. Standing before the arched doorway, she turned to give him a dark, level look. Her eyes were extraordinary, a rich midnight blue, the darkest blue eyes he had ever seen. "Are you coming?"

"Where?"

She went into the bedroom, already reaching to unfasten the black dress. Kingsley swallowed. He pushed away from the window, followed her into the bedroom. The dress lay on the floor. She had pulled the covers off the bed and lay there in the dimness, her whole body now seeming to glow with that faint luminescence, that bashful-moon lambency. He saw her in shadow, but he saw enough to make his throat ache.

He reached for the buttons of his shirt. "We're crazy for doing this," he said. "We don't even know each other's—"

"My name is Lisbet." The voice throaty, purring almost, sensual. "And

yours is Ray." She drew in her breath, sighed, and raised her arms toward him. He went to her. He kissed her, not once but many times, and at last he kissed her eyes, felt the soft flesh of her eyelids trembling at the touch of his lips. After a while he had no more thoughts of strangeness, but only of her and of the release she gave him.

DAYLIGHT WOKE him. He had painted the windows in the bedroom black. The bedroom/kitchen and bathroom had once been the office and rest room of the warehouse, and they shared the row of windows that ran the whole length of this side of the building. The windows were all right for a warehouse, and wonderful out in the old hallway that now was his studio, but he had felt exposed sleeping with the city looking in.

But sunshine spilled in from the studio through the open archway. He felt in bed for Lisbet, failed to find her, and sat up quickly. Black spots blossomed in his vision and swam to the hum of tinnitus. Kingsley closed his eyes until the dizziness passed, and in the warm darkness behind his eyelids, he heard a lingering melody, a fairy song, that faded into the humming of his ears.

After a moment, that, too, faded, and he opened his eyes, feeling steadier. He eased out of bed, stood, and padded barefoot to the bathroom, his head as light as if he were a little drunk. She was not there; her dress was no longer on the bedroom floor. The wreck of the paintings still littered the studio.

Kingsley felt detached, as if he had dreamed the whole thing and was now dreaming himself. He took a shower, his legs rubbery, his breath coming shallow. Toweling himself dry, he had another moment of vertigo and had to sit on the toilet for a moment to collect himself. Recovered, he dressed slowly, looking at his watch as he strapped it on: 11:44.

His appointment at Helio was for 1:30. The painting was due there then. Kingsley groaned, got his shoes on, and wandered through the three rooms again, half-convinced that Lisbet was hiding somewhere, and half-believing that she was only a dream, no more real than the half-remembered melody of his sleep.

Real or dreamed, she was not in the apartment, and walking through it only made him aware of his strange weakness, his unaccustomed lethargy. Kingsley's stomach fluttered at the thought of breakfast, but he did

brew and swallow a half pot of bitter black coffee.

On the way to the subway, and then during the ride into town, he felt curiously empty, as if there were the smallest gap between the world and his perception of it, as if he were an actor in the declining weeks of a play's long run. *Scared*, he thought. *Scared to face Jake. That's what's wrong with me. Unless I caught twenty-four-hour AIDS.* The bleak joke pleased him and made him laugh aloud. A woman in a babushka did not look at him, but edged frantically away.

Helios was not a large outfit, though it had a growing reputation as a publisher of collector's editions. Its offices were small, noisy, and crowded with stacks of manuscripts, boxes of books, furniture that might have been new the year before the Japanese bombers appeared over Pearl Harbor.

Jacob Rubin was the art director at Helios, and his cubbyhole of an office, a corner location with a narrow window looking out onto a busy street six floors below, was a haven of quiet, where the constant sound of telephones muted itself to background noise. Rubin stood five feet four, but he was so thin that he gave the impression of lankiness. With his bulbous bald head and long wrists, he reminded Kingsley of the little articulated wooden mannequin that used to pose for him in art school.

"I don't see a canvas," Rubin said as soon as Kingsley walked in. His waspish voice took on a rasping edge: "Let me guess. I'm not getting the picture. I'm getting an excuse."

Kingsley sank into a worn armchair. "Not even that, Jake. I'm sorry. It's beyond me."

Rubin let his breath out in a long hiss that managed to sound exasperated but resigned. "God damn it, Ray."

"I know what this means —"

The art director grunted, took off his round glasses, polished them with a handkerchief. "No, Ray, you don't know what it means. If you did, you wouldn't screw me like this. I can do it, you said. I need a chance, you said. And I put it all on the line for you, Ray. They told me, Frank and the others, they said you'd fuck up. Did I listen? Go with your gut feeling, I told myself. How long will it take?"

Kingsley shook his head. "You won't get a painting. Not from me. You've got to assign the project to some other artist. I know it's short notice —"

Rubin flapped his hand as if shooing flies. "Like hell. It's late, Ray, very late. Lowell's a name now, kid. There'll be a trade edition from her regular house in December, and if we don't beat it to press, if ours isn't a real first, we lose our shirts. What, should I sent it out with a white cover and just the words? Get another artist, he says." He sighed. "This headache I didn't need. Look, I can give you to the beginning of September, but that is absolutely —"

Kingsley stood. "Jake, understand me. I can't do it. I tried. It won't — I don't know; it won't live for me. I —"

Pushing back from the desk, Rubin tilted his head to stare up at Kingsley. "You look like hell, you know. You're not doing something you should tell me about, are you?"

For a second, Kingsley stared at him, uncomprehending. Then he grinned. "Drugs? Jake, I've got barely enough money to buy paint. I can't support two habits."

"You look sick as hell. Look, show me what you have. I —"

Kingsley shook his head. "I have nothing. The preliminary sketch you approved is all there is. I ripped the painting apart last night."

Rubin's glasses were opaque with reflected light, making his gaze blank-eyed, pitiless. "That was a damn fool thing to do." He opened a desk drawer, took out a sheaf of photocopies, shuffled through them. "Here. Take these and get out. I've got to find an artist."

Kingsley frowned down at the top sketch Rubin tossed onto the desk. It was bad, not as bad as his botched painting had been, but not good, not half the vision he had in his head. It was a woman's face, seen in three-quarter profile, dark-skinned, black-haired, sloe-eyed: the concept was not the horrific Kali of Hindu legend, not the blood-smeared dancer, but a woman subtly terrible in her beauty. Only — "It's not what it ought to be," Kingsley said.

"You're telling me? It should've been a painting by now, damn it."

Kingsley reached for a pencil — a coffee mug full of them perched on the corner of Rubin's desk — and turned the photocopy over, its blank side upward. "No, it's just wrong, badly thought out. But see it like this."

For a moment he had the same odd sensation that he had felt last night, when he first saw Lisbet in the street: the world darkened, and the darkness flowed toward a point, but this time the point was the end of the pencil, pressed against the paper on the desk before him. His head swam.

The destroying goddess, she balanced on her left leg, caught in the dance of death.

He felt his hand moving, heard the scratch of graphite on paper, but he saw nothing of what he was doing —

"Yeah," Rubin said, and the spell broke.

Kingsley blinked. The page bore a sketch now, a sketch so unlike his usual stiff, overworked style that part of his mind rejected it as his own work. But the pencil was in his hand, and the paper was in front of him.

There was the cityscape he had imagined the night before, suggested in verticals and starbursts; a hasty shading indicated night sky. And there was Kali.

The destroying goddess, she balanced on her left leg, caught in the dance of death. Her right leg, lifted and partly extended, balanced the gracefully outspread arms. Framed by billowing, ink-black hair, her face, even in a hasty pencil sketch, seemed illuminated, had the quality of the moon shining through cloud —

Kingsley's heart thumped. No, the face was not Lisbet's, but there was a sisterhood there, in the calm features, the full mouth, the wide eyes —

He saw the stars of midnight shining through those wide eyes.

"This is it," Rubin said, his voice trembling. "By God, this is it. How soon, Ray?"

"Huh?"

Rubin picked up the sketch. "God damn, man. Why didn't you tell me you were changing the concept? Not that I disagree — this is great — but when can we have it? Has to be by the first."

"Three weeks," Kingsley heard himself say.

"Acrylic?"

He nodded.

"Today's the tenth. Ray, listen to me. I can give you till the thirty-first. That is absolutely, my hand to God, the last possible day. If you miss that, you've screwed us. And if you screw us —"

"I'll never work in this town again," Kingsley finished. Rubin did not smile.

"So what the hell are you waiting in my office for? You got painting to do."

* * *

He had painting to do.

Kingsley cut a cold-press panel to twenty-four by thirty-seven inches, considerably larger than his first attempt, the oil on canvas, had been. The jacket art would be reduced to six by nine and a quarter inches, and much of the detail he saw in his mind would undoubtedly be lost. Still, he knew, he felt, that nothing smaller would allow him to do justice to the vision.

He applied three coats of progressively thinner gesso, smoothing each coat with ultrafine sandpaper. The sweet smell of the gluelike paste nearly maddened him, urged him to hurry so that the actual painting could begin. When the last coat of gesso had dried, and he had sanded it to glassy smoothness, he assembled his materials.

Normally, Kingsley dragooned one of his few friends to pose for figure paintings: the aspiring actress who waited on tables at the deli down the street, her roommate (a trim secretary who did not mind shedding her clothes for nude studies), the affable homosexual bodybuilder who took Kingsley's rejection of his advances easily and still remained the artist's friend — these and his other acquaintances had posed for him in the past for the price of conversation and a bottle of shared cheap wine. This time, though, he worked without a model, seeing everything, down to the last nuance of light and shadow, in his mind.

His timidity seemed to have vanished, his insecurity to have fled. Where normally he would have worked details with a tiny #000 brush, he now used a comparatively massive #1, its bristles flattened to give him the fine point he needed. The first three days of work saw the background and figure blocked in, the relative values established. From then on, Kingsley worked feverishly at overpainting, at layering hues and shades to produce a delicate, compelling translucence.

He worked as long as he could hold a brush. When his fingers grew too tired for that, he grabbed something to eat — something cheap, for his resources were dwindling — and fell exhausted into bed for four or six hours of sleep. He developed a blister on his right middle finger from holding the brush, but he ignored it until it thickened into a callus.

By the end of the second week, he could see his success. Kali danced for him, goddess of time and destruction, called from his imagination by paint and talent. Her skin was pale, glowing almost, her features not cruel, but terribly, inhumanly dispassionate. The face was classic in its awful

serenity, the billows of jet-black hair a net that trapped and enslaved the fairy cityscape in the background. And the eyes. . . .

The eyes were hers, Lisbet's.

Wide they were, and deep midnight in color, and after you looked at the painting for a while, you came to realize that the eyes were the eyes of a mask, hollow, and the lights you saw in their depths were the lights of distant stars that neither saw nor cared for you.

Kingsley stopped once, breathing hard, and wept at what he had done. Before him was the magnificence he had dreamed.

He worked on into the third week, texturing the sky, adding the highlights of the twinkling fairy city, impatiently drying the layers with forced air from a hair dryer set on "cool." Finally one morning he woke up, rolled out of bed, and went barefoot and naked into the studio, not caring if anyone could see him from the taller buildings across the way.

He stood staring at it for a long time, barely daring to breathe lest the illusion be broken. But it was no illusion: there was Kali, in all her terror and beauty, and the painting was more than an illustration. It was art.

He had been crossing days off a calendar since starting the painting. The last X was through August 30. The painting was due today. Still naked, Kingsley rummaged for a can of Clear Coat that still had some pressure in it, found one, and sprayed the panel. The clear aerosol burned his eyes, brought a sweetish alcohol taste to his tongue as he breathed the fumes.

Kingsley showered, found some clothes that did not reek, and carefully packed the panel. He caught the subway just after rush hour, rode it to the island, and then walked four blocks to the Helios offices. Jake Rubin met him in the reception room. "Let's see," he said as soon as they were in his cubbyhole.

Kingsley passed the package over. Rubin shook his head. "This is it, kid. I like you. My bosses tell me I'm crazy, but I like you. And I liked that sketch. Let's see—" He tore open the package, lifted the panel out by its edges, and stood with his head bowed over it.

"Kingsley licked his lips. "Well?"

"My God," Rubin said, his tone reverent. When he looked up, Kingsley saw with surprise that his eyes glistened. "Damn, Ray, this is too good for a book cover. You must know that."

Kingsley felt himself go weak, as if invisible strings supporting him

had suddenly broken. He fell more that sat in the disreputable armchair. "I'm glad," he said, his voice hoarse. "I kept thinking it was just me, that I'd lost my mind."

"This — kid, we're not paying you enough." Rubin shook his head, and he almost whispered, "We can't pay you enough."

Kingsley gave him a weak smile. "About that. Uh, Jake —"

Rubin looked at him, and his blue eyes grew sharp. "The hell, Ray? When did you eat last?"

Kingsley shook his head. "Day or two ago. It's all right; I was working —"

"Stay here." Rubin left, taking the painting with him. Left alone, Kingsley covered his eyes and felt himself trembling.

A hand shook him awake a moment later. "Ray. Here. Take it."

Blinking, Kingsley accepted the check. "This is early, Jake. It can't have gone through your Accounts Payable —"

"Take it, take it; you have to know where every dime comes from!"

Kingsley's throat was tight, his voice shaky: "Thanks, Jake. This is —thank you."

"No," Rubin said softly. "Thank you. Now get out of here, you bum, and get some food under your belt. Take care of yourself; I think we're going to be doing business again soon."

The check let Kingsley pay his rent, pay his overdue bills at the art-supply house, buy food; but food was not what he needed.

He needed her, Lisbet.

No one had seen her; no one knew of her: not the Chuns who ran the corner grocery, not the waitresses at the deli, or the kids who played stickball down the block, no one.

The lack of her ate at Kingsley. The fact that she did not know what power she had given his art — for he associated his success with *Mother Kali* completely with the night she had spent with him — pained him like a hollow and aching tooth.

The pain was worse when he tried to work.

The new pieces were all right, at least as good as the best he had done before meeting Lisbet, but they were far inferior to the painting he had done for Helios. They did not satisfy him.

In the three weeks after he turned *Mother Kali* in to Helios, he

worked at his easel in a desultory way during the days, and at night he went out looking for her, without success. It was late September when he received a letter bearing the Helios log and a scrawled "Rubin" as a return address. He opened it and read, "Get a telephone, you cheap bastard. Call me earliest. Jake." When he made the call from the pay phone in the deli, Rubin said, "Penny Lowell wants to meet you."

For a second, Kingsley did not place the name. Then he got it: "The writer? Why?"

"Wants to make you an offer on your painting." Rubin's voice dropped to a soft murmur: "Five thousand, kid. Stick her for that much at least. She's got it, and God knows we couldn't pay you what the cover's worth."

Kingsley's lips were numb. Part of him did not want to give up the painting, the sight of those deep eyes, but part of him never wanted to see them again. Rubin set up the meeting; and a few days later, during the first week of October, Kingsley and Penny Lowell had lunch together. Before it was over, she passed him a personal check, for considerably more than five thousand.

"There, that's done," she said, sipping her coffee. She looked forty, Kingsley thought, though he knew she was closer to sixty. Trim, tennismuscled, fair-haired, she radiated authority. Her mouth was a brilliant scarlet, the same color as Lisbet's had been — but Lisbet's lip color had not come off, as Penny Lowell's did on the rim of her coffee cup. "Would you like another job?" she asked, pinning Kingsley with a direct stare.

Her eyes were ice gray, he noticed. He smiled. "Not another book cover, not yet. I—"

The author shook her head. "A commissioned portrait," she said. "Not me. A friend of mine." She reached across the round table and tapped the pinkish orange check with a pointed red nail. "That again as fee. But I want the same life in it as I saw in *Mother Kali*. That's a condition."

Kingsley sipped his own coffee, a frothy cappuccino, and thought. After all, this was something like what he had dreamed of. "Let me consider it," he said.

Penny Lowell sniffed and tossed her head. It was a girlish gesture, though she looked anything but girlish in a forest-green suit over a pale beige silk blouse. "I need your answer now," she said.

Kingsley sighed. "Let me make a sketch or two. If you think they're what you would want, fine. If not —"

"Fine. Is tomorrow acceptable?"

Thinking of the cleanup he'd have to do, Kingsley shrank inwardly. But he said, "That ought to do."

"Good," she said, nodding like a woman who always got her way. She opened her checkbook again and uncapped a pen, a real fountain pen with a gold nib, and began to write. "Ten percent as a deposit. No more until you've got the work underway."

"All right."

She tore the second check free and held it out, her eyes almost hostile. "You know, you're a pretty good artist, for a man."

THE FRIEND was named Isabel, a nineteen-year-old slip of a woman, pale, dark-haired, brown-eyed, thin: neurasthenic, they used to call her type. A Poe illustration, Kingsley thought to himself, or a Dickinson one. She spoke very little, held Penny's hand as much as she could, and posed in uneasy alertness, like a bird disturbed by a nearby footfall and ready for flight.

"Just relax," Kingsley urged her as he set up his camera.

Isabel's eyes jittered, as if she were terrified. She reached out blindly, and Penny Lowell was there, taking her hand. "Just relax, dear," the writer purred. "And before you know it, I'll have something to remember you by forever." Isabel did become a little more at ease, though not much, and she posed satisfactorily as the afternoon went on. Kingsley took several reference photographs, then did some pencil impressions of the woman, trying to see beyond her tenseness to her natural state of repose. When the sitting was over, Penny kissed the girl on the mouth.

Kingsley made an appointment to show some preliminary sketches to the writer in a week's time. When the two women left, he stared critically at the roughs. They were not what he wanted them to be.

He had the photographs developed and printed, and on the third day, he tried to work the reference sketches and pictures into something approximating the portrait Penny Lowell wanted.

Nothing happened.

He walked again that night, walked to the alley overlooking the river, walked back alone, climbed the fire escape to the roof of the warehouse, stood gazing out toward the distant city, hazed by distance and mist. "Where are you?" he asked aloud.

"Here," Lisbet's voice said behind him.

He turned, and there she was, dressed just as he recalled her: and again the night seemed to flow into her, as if the night were coalescing, becoming her. They were in each other's arms in a moment; and in a few moments more, they were downstairs and in his bed.

He whispered to her during intervals between lovemaking, spilled the whole story in her ear, marveled at the burning touch of her flesh on his, caressed her and held her tight. "I know," she murmured. "I know it all."

This time he fought sleep for her sake; this time, when she slipped naked from the bed, he rose on his elbow. "Tell me about you," he said then.

She stood with her back to him as the black dress rustled down over her nakedness. "There is nothing to tell."

"Not true." He was sitting up in bed now, fully awake. "What's your name, your whole name?"

She bent to kiss him. "You know."

He held to her hand. "I know only Lisbet," he said. "That's not enough."

Her smile was unreadable in the gray light of a foggy dawn. "It will have to be."

"I want you to stay —"

She touched his face. "You look so tired, Ray. Rest now." She hummed, a curious, plaintive melody, the same alien tune he had dreamed before.

And somehow he was dreaming again, dreaming of Lisbet's mouth and her eyes and of the cold, distant stars.

When Kingsley woke, it was late afternoon, and he rose feeling shaky and wretched, as if recovering from a bout of flu. But when he glanced at the sketches, he saw exactly what was wrong, saw how the final painting would have to look —

Trembling with exhaustion, he started work.

This time there was hardly a pause, a moment to go to the bathroom, five minutes to eat something while standing looking at the panel on the easel, and then back to work again. He felt charged, felt energy flowing through him like electricity through the filament of a bulb; and like the filament, he felt himself being used up in the process. As soon as an area of paint was dry enough to be overpainted, he was working at it, the strokes of the brush firm and knowing; while that section was setting, he

moved to another part, putting the painting together as a man sentenced to life imprisonment might assemble a billion-piece jigsaw puzzle, with infinite patience.

She came a day ahead of schedule. He had just touched up the painting — God, it had gone fast! — when he heard the knock at the door. He opened it and saw Penny Lowell there, alone. She blinked, and her nostrils twitched.

Kingsley realized that he stank. He had not bathed in — how long had it been? “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t expect you until Wednesday.”

She frowned at him. “This is Wednesday. Did you — oh.” Her gray eyes were looking past him, at the panel. “Oh my God.” She pushed past Kingsley, went to stand six feet from the panel. “That’s it,” she said. “Oh my God, I can see her breathe.”

Kingsley came to look over shoulder. Isabel was there, a book in her lap, her head side-tilted as if she had been disturbed in her reading and had looked up to see — whom? Friend, lover? Death, the gentleman caller? Her expression was unreadable; the eyes, the dark eyes, held mystery beyond mystery.

“It looks ready to go. Is it? When will it be finished?” Penny asked, not looking around.

The word spun in Kingsley’s brain: *finished, finished, finished*. He put out a hand to steady himself —

“Ray? Can you hear me?”

He opened his eyes. The face was familiar, the round glasses, the balding dome. “Jake?” he asked, surprised at how thin his own voice sounded. “What are —”

“Don’t excite yourself,” Rubin said.

Only then did Kingsley realize that he was no longer at the studio. He smelled disinfectant, hospital odors. “What happened?” His right hand itched abominably; reaching to scratch it, he found an IV connection. He lifted his head from the pillow and looked to his left: an aged man lay in a fetal position there on a hospital bed, his eyes vacant of everything but misery. “Jake?”

Rubin put a hand on his shoulder. “Easy, don’t raise up. You passed out, kid. Scared the piss out of Penny. She called the EMTs, they got you here, and then she called me. How’re you feeling?”

Kingsley closed his eyes; they felt as if the insides of the lids were coated with grit. "Dead. Overdue for burial. What day is it?"

Rubin's laugh was a hiss of air. "Wednesday afternoon, kid. You been here a couple of hours. What have you been doing to yourself? You look like hell, must've lost fifteen pounds."

Kingsley rasped his left hand over his jaw. A bristly growth of beard prickled him. "Working too hard, that's all."

"Dehydrated, the doctor says. So they're dripping glucose in you to plump you out some."

The old man in the other bed groaned softly and, with infinite labor, turned over onto his back, then onto his side. Kingsley glanced at him, was horrified to see the mummylike body revealed by the slit hospital gown, the ribs like a washboard, the buttocks flat, the hipbones gaunt beneath the skin.

Jake was saying something. Kingsley rolled his head and brought the art director's face back into focus. "What?"

"I asked you a question," Rubin said with what seemed forced patience. "You been eating at all?"

"Sure."

"You don't look like it."

The living skeleton in the other bed groaned again. Kingsley resisted the temptation to look. "Jake, tell me something. When can I get out?"

Rubin shook his head, evidently misunderstanding. "Don't worry about the cost — Frank's letting Helios pick it up, and it's only a semi-private room. Least the cheap bastard can do after paying you what he did for *Mother Kali* —"

"Jake. When?"

Behind the round glasses, Rubin's eyes grew worried. "There's no law to keep you here. Anytime, kid, I guess. But maybe you should have some tests run, or —"

"No tests," Kingsley said. "I know what's wrong with me."

The man in the next bed took in a long breath and held it forever.

He got back to the studio near midnight. Penny Lowell had had the presence of mind to find his keys and lock up for him. He had reclaimed the keys from the hospital desk, and he was relieved to see the studio intact; nothing was missing, except for the portrait. Pushpinned to the

easel in its place was a salmon-colored check. She had occupied herself by making it out while she waited for the ambulance.

His knees shaking, Kingsley climbed the fire escape again, up to the roof. The night air was cool, Halloween coming on in a few weeks, then winter. He smelled it all, the burning leaves of fall, the nose-stinging coldness of snow, in one deep, quivering breath. The roof was empty, the fire escape the only way up. Holding on to its iron railing, Kingsley cleared his throat. "Where are you?" he asked.

"Here." She came softly behind him. He felt her palm, cool, smooth, on the back of his neck. "I'm here."

He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away.

"No, Ray. It's too soon. You need rest."

Kingsley could not bring himself to look at her. "It's you," he said, squinting at the distant blur of the city lights. "After you — we make love, then I have it, I have the gift, just for a short time. And then it goes away again, until you come back and —"

"Yes," she said.

He swallowed, his throat stringy and tight with phlegm. "But you take something from me. Every time there's less left for me."

"Yes."

He dared to look at her then. The lights of the distant city were no longer necessary to show her to him: she would be visible in the deepest night, in the blackest pit, for she burned with an unmistakable inner lambency now, a vitality that had come, he knew, from him.

"Why?" he asked.

Her voice was soft, but it held no regret: "It's what I am."

"Some kind of goddamn vampire?"

She sighed, a rustle like a dry leaf being swept by the wind. "People have called us that, but we are not blood drinkers. We do not feed as you do; we must take life from others."

"How?"

"In our own way. I can't tell you; you couldn't understand. But in exchange for what we take, we give our own gifts, such as we may."

The lights shimmered as tears came to his eyes. "That's crazy. Maybe I'm crazy."

"We live in your darkneses, and we live long lives. I could tell you stories — but you wouldn't believe them."

Kingsley started to speak, and could find his voice for only one rusty word: "Try."

The autumnal sigh again. "There was a poet in England, nearly two hundred years ago by your people's counting. He wrote a poem, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci —'"

"Keats, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Kingsley drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "I remember a little of the poem. 'And then I shut her wild wild eyes with kisses four.' But Keats died of tuberculosis, I think."

"Of consumption, yes. He thought so, too."

Kingsley shook his head. "Maybe I'm not insane, after all. Maybe it's just you. Are you telling me he died from — because of your kind?"

"No. Because of me." Her palm again, so cool and soft on his neck. "He was my first."

"Crazy," Kingsley said again, and now he was weeping in earnest. "Crazy." He gathered himself and turned on her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She smiled at him, but no mirth lived in that miserable smile. "Telling is forbidden."

"But now —?"

She was quiet for a long moment. "I don't want you to misunderstand me. We do not feel love, not as your people do. But I do feel — something — for you."

He snorted. "I'm a better lay than Keats, is it? Or a better meal?"

She shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't believe or understand."

"I understand that you said you'd kill me." His heart was thudding very fast now, so hard that it seemed to him that he trembled with every beat.

"No," she said. "It's not that way. Not for you. I will give you a choice." She was close, so close that he could feel her breath on his face, could smell its honey and spice sharpness. "You may have your years back, if you will; such years as you would have left, anyway."

"Have them back?"

"Yes. I can go away now, tonight. I can find someone else, someone who needs me and whom I need."

"Prey."

She did not flinch. "Prey. All right. That's your word. But notice how your people prey on each other before you judge me: the writer Lowell

draws life from that wretch of a woman. The men who pay for your work care only for the work, not for the anguish you put into it. How many husbands, how many wives, build their lives on the other's ruins? There are many different kinds of predators, Ray; one for every possible type of prey, I'd think."

He swallowed. "If you don't leave me, what then?"

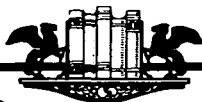
She kissed him. Her lips were hot, pliant; they carried no flavor of lipstick, but left his mouth and tongue burning, as if he had tasted some exotic sweet spice. She pushed away, stood with her palms against his chest. Her face was placid, soft, luminous. "I take what I must. I give what I may. You must choose. Now. You may have me, and your art, and your life, for a year or perhaps two; or you may have almost as many years as you would have lived if you had never met me."

The world revolved very slowly around the rooftop. His voice shaking, Kingsley muttered, "What if I want to make it on my own? I can do it. You've showed me that I can do it. It may take me years to get even half as good as I was with the Kali painting, but by God, it would be *me*, myself, and not some damned inhuman—" His words broke off in a sob.

"Choose." Was there a hint of sadness in her voice? If so, it sounded to Kingsley like no human sadness. "You must choose."

His heart beat against his ribs, a panicked scarlet bird battering itself against the bars of its cage. Already knowing the decision that he had not yet consciously made. Kingsley stared at Lisbet's pale, beautiful face. Her unpainted lips were the shade of fresh blood, her unblinking eyes the color of midnight unending.





BOOKS

A L G I S B U D R Y S

Down The Bright Way, Robert Reed, Bantam, \$4.50

Fear, L. Ron Hubbard, Bridge, \$16.95

And noted . . .

The C.S. Lewis Hoax, Kathryn Lindskoog, Multnomah Press. No Price Given

Rotten Rejections, Andre Bernard, Pushcart Press, \$12.50

DOWN *THE Bright Way* is Robert Reed's fourth novel, the first to originate with Bantam, and it continues his string of unusual settings and extraordinary premises. Clearly, he is not content to just be another science fiction writer.

Robert Reed lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, and now that he has made enough money to quit his day job, he has. Otherwise, his lifestyle continues in its accustomed mode; the only difference is that instead of spending time leaving the house and getting on the job, he doesn't leave the house; he just gets on

with the job, which is writing. I do not know what else he does — he is not married, and though he has a brother it is far from clear that he pays much attention to family — but I get the feeling that he does little else besides write, and that he is content.

Which I guess is as it should be, ideally. But how many first class talents do we see just living in Lincoln, Nebraska, and writing? His agent told him at one point he ought to get out to conventions more, and he has been doing that; what the agent did not tell him was that he should also attract attention. So *that* part of his self-promotion has yet to blossom.

So look around you, if you go to cons. You might see him. If you can get him to talk, you might hear something that will be of value to you.

But, be that as it may, Robert Reed has quietly written several extraordinary books, and *Down the Bright Way* is another.

It seems there is an infinity of Earths, each one different. So far, so

good, and nothing extraordinary about the idea. But now — suppose these Earths were embedded in something called The Bright Way, which appears to be an artifact of the Makers, the long vanished race which, millions of years ago, left its mark on the Universe and has now vanished. Suppose that, some fewer years ago but still counting in the millions, the Founders — a human race, on one of the Earths — discovered this, and the means to cross from one Earth to another, along the Bright Way. Suppose that the particular Founder who discovered this came up with the notion of visiting each Earth in turn, non-violently, just leaving little hints that will accelerate progress and a Portal on the Bright Way, in search of the Makers. And suppose that this has now been going on for quite some time, so that even as the Wanderers, as they are called, proceed from world to world, essentially unchanging, evolutionary effects are happening to the ones they leave behind — not that this is what Reed's book is about.

Suppose that *the* Founder — named Jy — was a furred, ancient creature, overdue for a new body. Suppose Moliak — who headed the Founder expedition headed in the opposite direction on the Bright Way — suddenly turns up in *her* direction, with an assistant named

Cotton who is a Termite — a member of *a* human race which has learned to live in a fashion that produces great soldiers. Suppose Moliak is wearing the body of Mr. Phillips. Suppose Moliak has discovered an Earth inhabited by the unFound — a race so fierce and so delighted in combat that in the end Moliak was forced to turn their Sun into a nova; suppose he then moved to the next Earth, and the next, and the next, and in each case found the unFound . . . What would this do to Kyle, who is an ordinary human but pretending to be a Wanderer, and Billie, who is an ordinary human female overwhelmingly flattered by his attentions; what would this do to Quence, who is *a* human who is about to leave Jy's entourage, and Xen, a Cousin — *a* human so little advanced that the Founders had to augment his brain mechanically, but whose people have since developed natural capacity — and Wysh, a bitter, guarded female.

The core of this book is actually what to do when, for the first time, essentially benevolent Wanderers clash with the unFound . . . who, it turns out, also have the secret of The Bright Way. A great deal goes on, from a fair variety of viewpoints. But what is extraordinary about this book is the manner in which Reed, when he is telling something

from a human viewpoint but not the viewpoint of *this* human kind, gets inside the head of this fictional creation and, as far as *this* viewpoint goes, tells the story from left field; from a point of view that is maddeningly, infuriatingly, *almost* sensible.

It seems to me that at times an editor has intervened — that there is stuff that was written but is now missing, or that was rewritten and not smoothed over quite enough. Perhaps not. But one thing is crystal clear. Robert Reed has written another extraordinary book.

Robert Heinlein loved to tell the story of the party in Philadelphia which L. Ron Hubbard attended before catching a train to the West Coast. It seems Ron told John W. Campbell, Jr., a story. Campbell blew up; now that Hubbard had told him the story, he'd never write it. Hubbard, according to Heinlein, grinned a sly grin, got on the train with a typewriter and a stack of blank paper, mailed back half the story from Chicago and the rest when his train got to Seattle. The year was 1940, and that story was "Fear."

Heinlein's tale has been told before. It is incorporated, for instance, in "H. H. Holmes's" *Rocket To the Morgue*, a murder mystery in which a whole bunch of SF writers appear, lightly disguised.

For that matter, H. H. Holmes was Anthony Boucher, who was William Anthony Parker White.

For fifty years, "Fear" has not died. Every once in a while, somebody brings it out again, in editions pretty and editions ratty. It's the story of James Lowry, four hours missing from his life, and what happens when, at last, he finds them.

The extraordinary thing is that "Fear" was first published in *Unknown*, Campbell's fantasy magazine. I will not belabor the point, because I can't without giving away something that I don't want to give away. But it was extraordinary; Campbell took a step one doesn't take lightly, in publishing it, and that is only the first of many instances in which this story exercised an uncommon power over the minds of its readers.

What can be discussed is the fact that it is one of the few horror stories Hubbard ever wrote, and probably the earliest, by anyone, to deal with horror in this particular mode. Certainly one would have to search for an earlier example. And if he found one, he would be hard put to show that it was as successful — technically, as well as in public approval — as "Fear."

The present edition, from Bridge, is by far the best and most elaborate, containing, among other things,

eight interior illustrations by Derek Hegsted, the 1989 grand prize winner of L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future Contest. It also has a slightly different text than any other edition; the editors restored the (slight) sections cut by Campbell, and omitted the (slight) rewrites done by Hubbard only at Campbell's behest. They have also done their best to eliminate the typos introduced by Street & Smith's original proofreading, and in this I think they have succeeded extremely well, though it is difficult to tell if, as happens, the typo forms an unintended but plausible word.

I strongly urge you to read "Fear." This present edition comes with encomia by everybody from Stephen King and Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov and David Hartwell and Robert Bloch and . . . So it's not just me that says so. Read "Fear," by some measure, perhaps large, you will never be the same.

The C. S. Lewis Hoax, by Kathryn Lindscoog, is about three years old. It's a handsome book, rather small but well finished, by Multnomah Press, 10209 SE Division St., Portland, OR, 97266, and the Multnomah Press, in turn, is a ministry of Multnomah School of The Bible, of another address in Portland. You will have to write to them about the price, which appears nowhere —

after the fashion of some academic presses — but it may be worth the effort. Certainly it's worth the effort if you're a Lewis scholar.

Lindscoog's calm, understated premise is that much of what has gone on since C.S. Lewis's death is a fraud of elaborate proportions; posthumous C.S. Lewis writing "discovered" by "his" "editor" — every one of those words deserves its own set of quotes, supplied by me, not Lindscoog — is nothing of the kind; new editions of his work, despite claims to definitive status, are nothing of the kind; parts of Lewis's life have been severely rewritten; his brother and his last wife, also, have been lied about wholesale; etc.

Now, to understand this you have got to care about C.S. Lewis, as many people do and Lindscoog certainly does, and you have to understand the sometimes mind-boggling elaborations of what has gone on, and so forth. I will say that Lindscoog makes a very persuasive case, and in saying this I am merely one of a great many people, some of whom are quoted on the dust wrapper and inside the book. More important, if you pretend to be a serious C.S. Lewis scholar, you have to have this book, because it is certainly not going to go away.

Rotten Rejections is, quite frankly, a Christmas present to me

from my agent, Merrilee Heifetz. Nevertheless, it costs \$12.50 from Pushcart Press, Wainscott, NY 11975. It is a compendium of rejection slips.

But not just any. These are masterpieces of rejection, and, furthermore, not always wrong — although the books they reject went on, sometimes years later, to be real blockbusters in the marketplace.

For instance:

Of Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*, some rejecting editor said: "These stories have trees

in them." Of Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park*: "This will set publishing back twenty-five years;" of *Moby-Dick*: "We regret to say that our united opinion is entirely against the book as we do not think it would be at all suitable for the Juvenile Market . . ."

There are plenty of others, including contributions from Jean Auel, J.G. Ballard, Harlan Ellison and Stephen King. Obviously, it's far too late for you to buy yourself a Christmas present. So think of some other occasion.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Encyclopedia of American Comics, Edited by Ron Goulart, Facts on File, \$39.95

This large and handsome book covers the American comic strip genre in an A-Z format. It includes over 1,000 entries, 117 black and white photographs, and 16 pages of color photos, ranging from Alley Oop through Ziggy.

* * *

Falling Torch, Algis Budrys, Baen, \$3.95

Falling Torch is the (pseudo) realistic story of the reconquest of Earth by Michael Wireman, who returns clandestinely from a human colony near Alpha Centaurus. Originally published in 1958 as *The Falling Torch*, this new edition includes a new chapter and is very slightly rewritten.



Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton,
(Knopf, cloth, 413pp, \$19.95)

THIS IS a novel about a promoter who assembles the best available scientists to cobble together bits of DNA from here and there, in order to grow a batch of authentic dinosaurs. With the idea of out-Disneying Disney, he puts the most dangerous animals ever to live on this planet in a theme park, where he has *everything completely under control*. But . . . but . . . does he?

It's by the author of *The Andromeda Strain* and all those other sci-thrillers. So you know the routine. Lots of realistic detail, building slowly but surely until we reach a point where suddenly all hell breaks loose. Then terrific action, tension till your fingernails bleed, characters you care about, science you believe in, the kinds of *serious* questions about the ethics of science that Jeremy Rifkin would raise if he only had a brain, and when it ends you're exhausted and satisfied and just the teensiest bit smarter than you would have been if you hadn't read it.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right, it's just the same old thing that Crichton always does. His own personal formula. He could do this in his sleep.

There are plenty of other novelists around who repeat their private formulas with book after book, so that by page ten you know pretty much everything that's going to happen by the end. For instance, Vonnegut. Updike. Krantz. Michener. Etc.

The difference between Crichton and them others is that even when you can see him reaching inside you and pulling all the same old levers and pushing all the same old buttons, *it still works*. So yes, there wasn't a single thing that happened in this entire novel that I didn't see coming from the start. I don't care. It's still great reading, it'll make a great movie, and I especially liked his invention of gloriously strange yet believable dinosaur behavior.

Uncle Orson predicts: Crichton will, as usual, be ignored at award time, because we're so *used* to him doing stuff like this and besides, he isn't One of Us. But I sure wish some dyed-in-the-wool sci-fi writers

(or even the artsies and the flashies who are trying to turn sf into warmed-over Woolf or Wolfe₁, or Wolfe₂, or Burroughs — W., not E.R.) would at least make an effort to learn maybe a teaspoonful of craft from Crichton so that now and then one of their pages would be this much fun to turn.

Just because Crichton makes it look easy doesn't mean that it isn't worth doing. Because of his craft, Crichton will probably have more influence over more readers — and we're not talking dumb ones, either — than any five genre insiders.

So — no Hugos for you, Crichton. You'll have to make do with the feeble satisfaction of knowing you have reshaped the world just a little bit. (And all that nasty money.)

A Heroine of the World, Tanith Lee, (DAW, paper, 448pp, \$4.50)

I'm trying to figure out why I didn't read *A Heroine of the World* when it first came out in the summer of '89. Lee is a writer I've admired ever since I read her perfect story "Red as Blood," which remains, in my opinion, the best-ever twisted adaptation of an old fairy tale. Perhaps I sometimes shy away from reading Lee simply because of the tremendous emotional investment that all her works, short or long,

demand of the reader.

Lee's language is powerful, evocative; her voice sounds as though it comes from several centuries ago, out of an era when eloquence was as natural as breathing. There are never any phony archaisms — none of that "forsooth" stuff, none of the warped syntax like "Fair she was and tall." (That sort of writing always makes me want to describe low characters in the same fashion: "Fishbelly white he was, and fat" . . . "Liquored-up he was; yea, verily shit-faced.") Unlike most fantasists who wish they could write magnificently and even *pretend* to be writing magnificently (I once knew of a writer who actually thought he could do authentic Elizabethan dialogue by lifting whole phrases and sentences from Shakespeare), Tanith Lee can actually do it, and so naturally that you begin to wonder why nobody else seems to remember what *real* English sounds like.

But *A Heroine of the World* isn't a masterpiece because of Tanith Lee's language. It's a masterpiece because she knows how to write powerful stories that strike at the root of love and sex and death, which, in case you haven't noticed, is the center of all the tales that stand the test of time. You know what I mean: the kind of story where, at the end, you don't think

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"good read" or "neat idea"; instead you sit there staring blindly into space, utterly spent from having really *lived*, a life that was worth living. Fiction realer than reality, truer than truth, and more beautiful than beauty.

What is the story of *A Heroine of the World*? Synopsis here is akin to mutilation, but I'll give you the drift. A girl is at the brink of womanhood in a city that thinks of war as a game; when her mother goes off to watch her father play at war, she loses them both. Her icy aunt kills herself rather than submit to even the most considerate of enemy occupations; our young heroine finds herself the half-willing mistress of a high-ranking enemy. In the midst of her powerlessness, however, she discovers that she, too, has power. She saves one man with a stroke of a pen; she kills another, with perhaps a bit more effort. She passes from marriage into wealthy widowhood, only

semi-fraudulently maintained, then gives it all away to one man because she can't escape from her love for another. Through it all the gods tease her with hints that they just might be looking out for her.

But I have to stop; writing this synopsis has become too painful, as I remember what it felt like to live through these events and realize that I'm not conveying even a fraction of their power.

The only dissatisfying thing about *A Heroine of the World* is that at the end, one is left with the distinct impression that the story has only just begun. But well begun is half done, I've heard; if a sequel is coming, let it come quickly; and if it isn't, then I can attest to you, this is one of those books that leaves you wishing for more. Wishing you never had to leave a place of such nobility and grace, of such horror and helplessness; a place of gods and heroes, sadly lacking in the real world.



You perhaps know John Morressy for his amusing stories about the wizard Kedrigern. Here is something quite different: a fascinating and allusive story about a village, its protector and its liberator.

The Liberator

By John Morressy

UNSEN MADE HIS way slowly down the mountain, slow not from caution, for the path was familiar, but from the stiffness in his legs and the weariness in his aging bones. He stopped in sheltered spots to catch his breath, pausing only briefly before starting on his way again. The mountain mist was dank and cold, penetrating even his thick cloak to chill and knot his muscles. It pained him less to go on than to halt.

Unsen had come to dread every summons from Mashossa. The stench of death lay around her lair, and the wind, for all its howling and buffeting, could not sweep it away. Splintered bones crunched underfoot, and shattered armor and weapons were strewn everywhere about. Mashossa's den was a torment to human senses, but far worse was the fear that enfolded Unsen at sight of the great dragon. He knew he had served her faithfully and not offended; but Mashossa might have perceived an offense where none had been meant; or perhaps others had offended, and he had been called to suffer for their offense; perhaps Mashossa had chosen this

moment to destroy him, or maim him, as a warning to the village. He never knew why he had been summoned. In truth, Mashossa had never been cruel to him, never hurt him; but in her presence, the fear was always there. He could only stand humbly before her, awaiting her message, and hope that he would be spared.

Unsen was senior of the village elders, and by descent the servant of Mashossa. The title carried honors and privileges, and his word was heard with respect and obeyed as the will of the dragon. But many were the times when Unsen would have given all he possessed, all the honors, gifts, and deference his office brought, to be an old man dreaming in peace by the fireside, forgotten by the world.

This time, Mashossa had been generous. She was done with the last of the brigands taken in the summer, and she gave Unsen, as a gift to her village, a purse of coins found on their leader. It contained much silver and a few gold pieces. She demanded nothing in return.

But her talk had been strange, and confusing to him. Unsen had never found it easy to follow the dragon's speech. It burst forth in hisses that pained his ears and rumbling roars that shook his bones; it was full of unknown words and phrases, bits of lost languages and the names of men and places forgotten by all but dragons. This time her talk was obscure in a new way, as if she were at last truly trying to communicate with him; not to issue a command, but to tell him things for which no words existed in the tongues of men, and no images dwelt half-remembered in human minds; things known to dragons and creatures of their world, but inconceivable to any two-legged walker on earth. He had done his best to understand, as much out of genuine interest as out of fear and a sense of duty, but her words only conjured up flashes of insight, like distant fireflies in a dark forest. The thought that these fireflies might blaze as brightly as suns for him if he could only find the key to their meaning troubled Unsen, and provoked him. When he came to the last bend in the trail, where the hillside fell away sharply to reveal the village below, he sat for a time in the niche there, sheltered now from wind and damp, and tried vainly to make sense of what he had heard.

The village was spread out before him, neat clusters of buildings with tilled areas between. No walls or palisades enclosed it, no watchtowers rose, no gates shut travelers out. Unsen was one who had seen other

villages, and he knew that his was different from them all. His village was safe and free, thanks to Mashossa. She protected them from the wandering bands of soldiers, the pillaging knights, the thieves and brigands, the bears and wolves, the kings. No plagues came here, and the crop flourished. Her demands could be hard, her presence frightening, but she preserved her people. Those who lived in fear of Mashossa need fear nothing else.

Yet there were some who complained, and chafed under her rule. The young, of course, but that was only to be expected of the young. They had not seen the things their elders had seen. Unsen himself had had doubts, once, long ago. No, it was the elders, the ones who knew the stories of the old days before the coming of Mashossa, whose talk was foolish and wicked. It misled and deceived, even to the point that it provoked some to try to leave Mashossa's domain. She had been lenient toward the elders thus far, but surely, thought Unsen, she knew their words, even their thoughts. Mashossa knew all.

Unsen rose, shaking his head in frustration. Mashossa might have the power to hear the words and probe the minds of distant men, but Unsen had not such power over Mashossa's words and thoughts. If she had a message or a teaching for him, she would have to make it plain to his human faculties, or he would never understand.

The village gathered that night to hear Unsen's message. When he told them of the dragon's bounty, and held up the purse of coins, there were expressions of pleasure and even some grudging words of gratitude. When he informed them that Mashossa had no demands, their relief was great. But when the assembly was over, and Unsen was alone, his mind was troubled. In their very words of thanks and praise, he had detected something forced and false. If Mashossa knew of their divided feelings — and surely she could divine such things, if she wished — the punishment might be severe.

The next day, when work was done, Unsen spoke privately with his grandson. Marnen was a bright young man, quick-minded and a good speaker, and Unsen looked forward to passing his office on to him when the time came; but on this evening, Marnen hedged and fumbled and avoided coming to the point until Unsen bluntly demanded to know what was afoot in the village.

"The people are unhappy," Marnen said.

"What cause have they to be unhappy? We're safe; the crops are doing well. . . . Is there some problem Mashossa should be told of?"

Marnen turned on him and blurted, "The problem is Mashossa. We want no more of her rule. We're sick of living in slavery!"

"Silence, boy! She's punished men severely for saying less."

"Let her punish me, then. If she punished all who hate her, she'd have no one left to serve her but you and a few frightened slaves."

"She gave us gold and silver for the village treasury. Is that how a master treats slaves?"

"What good is gold and silver when no one can leave the village except on her command?"

Unsen frowned. "You question things beyond your understanding, boy. Mashossa rules. We obey her, and we survive and prosper. Would you change that?"

"Blexter and his family did not survive."

"They disobeyed Mashossa's law. They deserved their punishment."

"They only tried to leave the village."

"Mashossa forbids it," Unsen said flatly.

"But Mashossa leaves when she pleases. She tells no one, asks no one permission. She was gone for three years last time, and longer than that the time before."

Exasperated, Unsen brought his staff down on the planking and cried, "Mashossa is our ruler! She makes the laws, and we obey them." When Marnen only set his jaw and glowered at him in angry silence, Unsen went on in a gentler voice, "She is wiser than we, wiser than any man. She leaves only to lure prey to the village. You saw how she appeared when the brigands came last summer. Three years absent, and when we needed her, she fell upon our enemies like a hawk on hens!"

"She has fallen on us as well. Before Blexter and his family, there were others."

"They oppose her, and she punished them, as rulers must. She has demanded no tribute from this village in your lifetime, only loyalty and obedience."

Marnen seized on his words. "But when you were young, she demanded lives!"

"Who told you this?"

"Everyone knows it. Mashossa once devoured our people, and will

do so again if she can take no others."

Unsen closed his eyes, forcing himself to contain his anger. The situation was worse than he feared. The elders were warping the minds of the young, revealing things all had sworn to keep hidden. Marnen and his generation could not understand the past. They saw a bald fact and passed angry judgment in an instant.

"I hear no denial, Grandfather. We were once her prey, and yet you serve her, and tell us we must be loyal to her."

"It was not as you think. That happened long ago, and things were different. Four feedings a year was all she ever required. She took the marauders and those who died."

Marnen gave a low, harsh laugh of disbelief. "And what if no one came, and no one died? Was Mashossa patient?"

"We chose fairly, by lot. All shared the risk, as all shared the benefit of her protection."

"Is it protection, when she calls for lives?"

"Yes!" Unsen cried. "At worst, Mashossa took a few lives, and in return she gave us peace and security. We're fortunate to have her to watch over our village."

Marnen rose. He stood looking down on the old man, and then he shook his head and left the little cottage without another word.

Unsen was much distressed by the conversation. If Marnen dared to speak such things openly, he could not be alone in his disloyalty. Mashossa would not let it pass unpunished.

They did not want to understand; that was the problem. They could not appreciate the realities of their situation any more than Unsen himself could comprehend every utterance of the dragon. Without Mashossa's protection, the villagers would be prey to all the horrors that ravaged the world outside. Her very name was a shield against attack. When marauders, emboldened by her long absence, dared to violate the village, Mashossa reappeared, falling like divine judgment from the skies. She did not fail her people.

If there were some chance of existing safely without Mashossa, things would be different; but there was none, none at all. Unsen remembered the tales his father had recounted, of life in the days before the dragon, when the villagers had huddled together in fear, trembled at the sight of an armed man, planted crops with little hope of a harvest, and harvested,

when they did, in the certainty that their stores would be plundered, the village burned, if they dared resist. His father had told of murders, rapes, and looting, of grisly violence for no reason but a robber's whim, of a life without hope. All his life he had blessed the day of Mashossa's coming, and Unsen had seen him weep for joy to recall her vengeance on the raiders who next descended on the village. His generation had never questioned her demanded tribute. Every alternative was worse.

And now the old had forgotten the past, and were turning the young, who knew the past only through their elders' tales, to a dangerous course of action. Unsen feared for his village.

NOT LONG afterward, Mashossa summoned him again, and detained him in her cave for nine full days before sending him back. He returned to the village with no commands and no instructions for the people. Her message this time had been for him alone, and his head ached from the strain of sustained concentration on her hissing, rasping, penetrating voice.

Unsen's mind teemed with inexplicable concepts and unfamiliar images. A change was coming: that much was clear. Mashossa was changing, and her relationship with the village would change, and perhaps even the villagers themselves would become different. What Unsen could not grasp was the nature of these changes. Mashossa might have been telling of a metamorphosis into something unimaginable, or of her impending death, or the destruction of the village and all in it. Perhaps all things in the world were coming to an end. Unsen knew not whether to tremble or rejoice. Mashossa's mind was so different from his that he could understand no more, try as he might. He could only wait.

In the spring, D'Amberlan came to the village, and Unsen saw his arrival as a sign that Mashossa's message was soon to be made clear. Other champions had come in past years. Their bones all lay at the top of the mountain. But D'Amberlan was different from the rest. He was younger and stronger, and he showed no fear.

He came to them joyously, smiling on the crowd who gathered to greet him, and often laughing aloud in sheer exuberance. His armor gleamed like winter sunlight on wind-scoured ice. Silver bards, and housings of green and gold, adorned his gray war-horse. When D'Amberlan unsheathed

his sword and brandished it overhead, announcing his name and his mission, the young cheered, and the elders exchanged covert glances. Unsen saw his grandson shouting eagerly, urging his companions on, and felt fear and anger in equal measure.

D'Amberlan told them that he would face Mashossa the following day. A dozen voices begged the honor of offering him hospitality, and Marnen's was among the loudest. The knight chose to stay with Lahal, one of the elders. Marnen joined the crowd as they proceeded to Lahal's house, part of a shabby guard of honor welcoming the liberator.

When Unsen spoke to his grandson that night, Marnen showed no remorse for his disloyalty. He was as filled with anticipation as a bridegroom, excited as a man on the morning of battle. Wild speech poured from him. Unsen let him rave on unchecked. Only when he paused, breathless but still bursting with his hopes, did Unsen silence him with a patient gesture.

"Have you forgotten everything? A hundred men, more than a hundred, have challenged Mashossa. Yet she lives," he said.

"None of them were like this man."

"No, there has been none like him, not in my memory," the old man conceded. "But he is one man. However brave and splendid, he is only one, and a mere man against a dragon. There is no hope for him, and only danger for those who support him."

"I think not," said Marnen.

"Then you think foolishness," said the old man angrily. "If you side with this outsider, and cheer him on, Mashossa will punish you for it."

Marnen shook his head. "A change is coming, Grandfather. I know it. I've had dreams."

"What dreams? Tell me!"

"They're obscure, and difficult to understand. But something is coming that will make all things different; that much I know. The world is about to change in some great way."

Unsen reached out to clasp his grandson's hand in both of his own. "She has said the same to me, up on the mountain. This is a warning to you, Marnen. For the sake of our family, for our long service to her, Mashossa is giving you a chance to save yourself."

"I find no such message in these dreams. They're clouded and uncertain, but there's fear in them."

"Mashossa fears no man."

"Then she fears something else. Perhaps there are powers greater than hers, and she senses their coming."

The thought silenced both men for a time. Unsen rose stiffly and took up his staff. "I must go to Mashossa. The village may be in danger."

"I think only Mashossa's in danger. Warn her, if you like. D'Amberlan will welcome her all the same. We'll be rid of the tyrant at last."

"Is that what the elders tell you?"

"It's true!"

Unsen shook his head. "It's a lie. A pleasing one, but a lie. If this champion wins, we replace a powerful guardian with one who is merely human. Only then will you know tyranny."

"D'Amberlan is no tyrant. He came to free us."

With calm certainty, Unsen said, "He's no tyrant now, perhaps. He will be, in time. Victory teaches men to be tyrants."

"Better a tyrant than a monster."

"A man can be a monster."

"Why do you speak so confidently? What do you know of these things?" Marnen demanded.

"Mashossa has sent me from the village on five separate occasions. I know enough of the world to know that you're about a foolish and dangerous deed. When Mashossa has slain this man, she may punish those who cheered him on against her."

"And what if D'Amberlan slays the dragon?"

"Then you may be punished in another way."

Marnen left without words of parting. Unsen donned his cloak and set out at once. The moon was faint, but he needed little light on the path he knew so well.

Dawn was nearly upon him when he reached the mountaintop. As he approached Mashossa's cave, Unsen realized that he did not know what to say. She had no need of his warning, and he could do nothing to protect her. He was no longer certain why he had come to the dragon, only that it had seemed to be his duty. Now he was confused; but all doubt vanished when he heard, "Hasten! Hasten to me! The time is here!"

"Mashossa, a champion has come to the village! He will face you this very morning!" Unsen cried.

"Champions do not matter. My work is complete. Yours begins. Come," the dragon commanded.

"This champion is formidable, Mashossa."

"I say he does not matter. It is fulfilled. I must return to the old lands, but I will instruct you before I go. You are servant of Mashossa, and servant you shall be."

They entered the cave as the first light broke over the eastern hills. When the sun stood above the horizon, D'Amberlan came, with a score of villagers straggling behind him.

Mashossa's cave opened at one end of an oval depression in the mountaintop. At the other end, facing the cave entrance, was a narrow pass through the rock walls. D'Amberlan rode through the pass and halted his mount a few paces from the entrance to the cave. The villagers took up places on the rim of the depression, overlooking the waste of bones and rotting armor. D'Amberlan raised his horn and blew three clear, strong notes in challenge. Then he couched his lance and waited.

He wore no plate armor this day, only a simple knee-length hauberk of chain mail and a cylindrical helm. He wore no surcoat for Mashossa's claws to snag, no unnecessary reinforcement to weigh him down. His plan of battle depended on speed and mobility.

The dragon's emergence was so swift that the watchers shrank back, and some cried out. D'Amberlan attacked at once to catch her before she could take to the air. His lance was leveled at her throat, but at the last instant before contact, he swerved and drove it hard into the base of her left wing. As she tugged the lance free, he sprang from his horse, drew his sword, and rushed to slash at her foreclaw. His plan was to immobilize Mashossa rather than attempt to kill her outright, as the others had tried to do. While she could fly, and scuttle swiftly among the shifting rubble, she had the advantage over a man. Flightless and crippled, she was no more than a trapped animal.

Mashossa seemed to sense his plan at once. She drew back her claw, and D'Amberlan's blade smashed into a heap of bones. He recovered and pursued, driving her back with hard blows to the face. His sword rebounded from the horny plate, but Mashossa shook her head and hissed angrily at the force of his blows. She darted from side to side, narrowly escaping his worst cuts, but she moved steadily back, up the slope that led to the cave entrance.

The end was quick. Mashossa scuttled backward, almost into her cave, then, as D'Amberlan clambered up after her, she launched herself forward. Her jaws closed on his thighs. She swung him high, as a dog tosses a rat, and brought him down hard against a boulder. He hung limp and broken. She bit hard and shook her head, and his trunk flew free in a spray of blood to fall among the dry remains of those who had come before. The sound of Mashossa's crunching jaws was doubly frightful in the morning stillness.

Marnen's shout came loud and clear from the ridge. "Mashossa, great worm, we will avenge him! Do you hear? We will avenge him, and all the others!"

The dragon turned and opened her bloody jaws in a roar of warning. The men on either side of Marnen loosed an arrow straight down her throat, and Marnen lowered his staff and ran headlong down the slope to thrust hard at her side. The staff snapped. He dodged the swipe of her wing and clubbed at her with the butt end. By this time the others were converging on Mashossa from all sides, hacking with axes and daggers, thrusting with their staves. Marnen took up D'Amberlan's fallen sword, wielding it clumsily, but landing one hard blow after another. The dragon's tail struck down all who came within its scything reach, but even though a dozen fell, the rest fought on, swarming over her. When one brought his ax down just behind her eyes, penetrating to the brain, Mashossa's head snapped back. She gave a horrid shriek and collapsed on her side. Her scorching breath sent fallen assailants tumbling among the bones. Then another villager drove his splintered staff deep into the wound. She shuddered once and groaned. After one long, final hissing gasp, she was still.

For a time the men were stunned. The impossible had happened. They stared at the body of the dragon, then at each other, and only then became conscious of their wounds. Their heaving breaths were the only sound, until at last one said in a awed voice, "She's dead."

"We've killed Mashossa," said another.

Marnen climbed to the dragon's back. Holding up bloody hands, he cried, "The monster is dead! Our village is our own at last!"

Others took up the cry. They laughed, they cheered; those who were able broke into frenzied dances of sheer exultation; a few, suddenly sobered, turned to the fallen; some collapsed in exhaustion. They were like men recovering from a wild debauch, or returning from another world, half-dazed, half-aware of the momentous deed they had accomplished,

unable to compose their minds and settle to the work at hand.

Two of the elders, who had come up the mountain with the rest but taken no part in the struggle, now moved among them, praising, comforting the injured, covering the dead. They passed out water and spoke words of reassurance to each man. Those who were uninjured assembled by the cave entrance, where Lahal addressed them.

"It would be good for all in the village to come and see Mashossa's body. Let them touch it, and take a scale or a tooth as a remembrance. There must be no doubt of her death," he said, and all assented.

"What about her cave?" one man asked.

"Seal it!"

"Search it for treasure!"

"There is no treasure in Mashossa's cave," Marnen said, stepping to Lahal's side. "Unsen was familiar with every part of her lair, and he told me that Mashossa kept no treasure."

"Every dragon has a hoard," someone called out, and others shouted their agreement.

"Mashossa had no need of treasure. Whatever she took, she gave to the village, so food could be bought in time of famine," Marnen replied. "Unsen told me of this. Five times he was sent away to purchase food for us."

"That's true," a man said.

Lahal raised his hands for silence, and said, "Mashossa used her plunder to keep us well fed, as we feed our livestock. But we need fear her hunger no more."

"What shall be done with Unsen?" one asked.

"Punish him! He served the dragon," others cried.

This time, Marnen signaled for their attention, and when they were silent, he said, "Unsen is gone. I told him of my dream of a great change, and he was much afraid. I think he knew Mashossa would die, and fled in fear of his own life."

"Hunt him down!"

"Bring him back for punishment!"

Over their sounds, Marnen called out, "We'd never find him. Mashossa's cave has a hundred exits. Unsen knows the outside world, and we don't. Let him go."

"He betrayed us!"

"Unsen must pay!"

"Let him go," Lahal said. "We have other work to do. Unsen doesn't matter now."

With the dragon dead, Unsen lost his importance for the villagers. He had never been truly hated, only envied. The two who had cried out against him made no attempt to arouse the others, and Unsen was soon forgotten. In the end they decided to block up the entrance to the cave and return to the village, where the elders would organize a procession to the mountaintop and a festival to celebrate their deliverance.

FOR TWO years, very little changed in the village. The weather was fine. Crops were abundant, and people spoke mockingly of the old belief that the dragon's presence brought good growing and a rich harvest. But in the third year following Mashossa's death, the winter was long and bitter, and the spring rains were meager sprinkles that barely dampened the soil before passing on. Summer, when it came at last, came in a sudden blast of dry heat that lay over them without relief. The rains came violently, and too late to save the crops; they only washed away the powdery soil and left the land scored and rutted.

That year the villagers were forced to travel in search of food, which they purchased with gold and silver given them by Mashossa. The next year was good. At harvesttime, raiders came. They killed two families on outlying farms and a man of the village, and carried off two women and a child. They stole nearly a quarter of the harvest, and destroyed as much as they took.

The villagers survived on what remained. They did not rebuild the burned dwellings beyond the village. They drew in and clustered closely together for mutual protection. They built a watchtower, and began work on a wall, but while the wall was still only a scattering of low mounds of dirt and piles of stones, more raiders came. The villagers drove them off, and killed three. But two more villagers died in the fight, and much of the stored food was destroyed.

When a small troop of men-at-arms came to the village, wearing the colors D'Amberlan had worn, the people believed their luck had turned and they were safe at last, under the protection of the great lord Pavache, D'Amberlan's father. The villagers welcomed the men-at-arms. They took

them to see the dragon's remains and the cairn on the mountaintop where they buried D'Amberlan's body. They were fervent in their praise of the man who had sacrificed his life for them, inspiring them to rise up and deliver themselves from the dragon's yoke.

Two men returned to report to Lord Pavache, and the rest remained in the village. The raiders did not reappear. A few of the villagers were unhappy with the conduct of the men-at-arms, saying that they behaved more like conquerors than protectors; but most were grateful for their presence. They swallowed their insults and turned a blind eye to their misdeeds.

Word came from the Lord Pavache in the spring. The village had been taken under his protection. When his messenger announced the tribute to be levied on them, the people were shaken; when he added the penalty that the Lord Pavache had imposed for the death of his son, they despaired. It was many times the sum in the village treasury. They could not hope to pay it.

The men-at-arms assured them that the debt to the Lord Pavache could, and assuredly would, be paid. The villagers might have to work twice as hard and twice as long as ever before, and learn to live with empty bellies and aching backs, but they would meet their obligations. What they did not pay, their children would, or their children's children. The Lord Pavache was a just and patient man.

The years that followed were a featureless blur of exhaustion for all the villagers. When the harvest was in, half of them were led away to do other service for their protector, and brought back just in time to begin working the fields again. The rest remained behind to work on the fortifications. No one was exempt. They dragged themselves woodenly from one day to the next, stung by a lash when they faltered or fell.

Then, one night, a dream came to Marnen. He knew that he had had a similar dream, perhaps the same dream, years before, but his mind was so dulled that he no longer remembered things clearly. The dream came again and again. On the fifth night, it was a command, sharp as a goad. Marnen came fully awake and alert. He felt none of the stumbling stupor of morning; he had the clear wakefulness of one freed from a trance. He rose from his pallet, dressed swiftly, and, taking all the food and water he could carry, he slipped from his cottage without a sound.

Before dawn he stood amid the whitened bones of Mashossa. He did

not pause to rest, but went directly to the cave entrance and began to work at the stones that blocked it. He was one man undoing the work of twenty, and the settling and clinging growth of twelve years, but by sundown he had cleared away much of the outermost layer. In another day he broke through, and by the third day he had made a passage wide enough to admit him.

The way led downward, in utter blackness once he had turned from the light of the entrance, but he walked steadily, without hesitation, sure of every footstep. He went on, undeterred by the sudden cold gusts that came from side passages, and the echoes that his footsteps sent reverberating in unseen galleries. After a long time, he felt the air warming and saw a faint light ahead.

She crouched on a flat stone beside a pool of bubbling fire that filled the great cavern with heat and light and faintly sulfurous smoke. Around her lay the emerald shards of her shell, and a scattering of bones and rags. She was small — barely the size of a hayrick — and her scales were the palest gold.

"You are summoned to be the servant of Anaxtal," she hissed softly, her voice childlike, but with the firm note of command.

Marnen was overwhelmed by the sensations stirring within him. After years of despair, of weariness in every bone, torpor in mind and spirit, feelings were coming alive again: joy and rage, hatred and gratitude, love and horror and a craving to be free all battled within him as he stood before Anaxtal.

She spoke again, and her voice was a sweet sibilance that filled his mind with reassurance. Falling forward prostrate, tears streaming from his eyes, Marnen pressed his lips to her foreclaw and said fervently, "Save us, Anaxtal! Save us, and set us free!"



Wendy Council lives in San Francisco, where she writes full-time and works as a part-time computer network administrator. She has published poetry and non-fiction, but "Stigmata" is her first fiction sale. The story grew, in part, from her work as a crisis counselor in the 1970s. Be warned that this is a disturbing story because of its subject and a treatment that is pure and powerful.

Stigmata

By Wendy Council

WHEN HER OLDER sister moved away from home, Beth was both relieved and guilty for feeling the relief. Her sister, Monica, older by five years, fought too often with their mother and father. Beth remembered a time when the three of them didn't yell so much at each other, and she did her best to make the family come back to peace. But no one would listen to her, no one except God.

Mama fluttered around Monica, making sure she had everything she needed, giving last-minute advice. Papa sat in his chair, quiet as always, smoking cigarette after cigarette and staring at the television set, where Arnold Palmer was putting for a birdie. He ignored his wife and daughters.

When her sister had carried the last item — the smaller of their sewing baskets, the one patched with black electrical tape — out the front door, Beth went upstairs to her room to pray. Monica hadn't liked the shrine in Beth's room. She said it wasn't normal to think too much about God. But

Monica thought a lot of wrong things. Just look how badly she acted toward Papa sometimes.

Beth crossed herself, took down the rosary draped over the Virgin, kissed it, and prepared to ask for forgiveness for her lack of charity toward her sister.

The statue of the Blessed Mother stood to the right of her shrine, in a spot Beth had chosen carefully. At sunrise on a sunny Christmas day, light from her bedroom window fell full across the Virgin in her blue robes. By mid-January, because of the angle of the sun, Mary stood in shade. Christ on the left side of the table was in light from Easter until the start of the school year. Year in, year out, when Beth knelt before the shrine, the sun shone at the same angle in each season. This was proof of the constancy of God. While she knelt before the Christ and the Virgin, she knew only that this was a late-spring afternoon; she could not tell what year it was.

As she prayed, Beth felt the power of God's love. Peace enfolded her like warm arms. She would feel cleansed after her ext confession. Until then, she resolved to be more compassionate toward her family. Beth hoped that when she was older, such tolerance would come more easily to her.

In the evening, Beth went with her mother to clean their church. On Mondays, in service to their parish, the two of them tidied up. It was perfectly quiet and cool in the empty church. Beth was drawn to the altar; above and behind it, Christ hung from the cross, bent under His crown of thorns.

She stopped to light a candle for Monica; Mama lit one for President Kennedy. Sliding a dustrag over the railing, Beth watched the smoke from the candles mingle, carrying their prayers to God, and she was filled with the joy of knowing He always listened.

Her mother walked Beth home, then said good-bye and left for Mrs. Winston's, where she watched the baby while the widow went to a night job at the bakery.

Beth said her night prayers, then went to bed. She had no idea how long she had been sleeping, when she awoke and realized she was not alone.

He bent over the bed in the dark. Her covers were pulled down. He tugged her nightgown up, exposing her belly and chest to the night. She

could hear his loud breath, the familiar roughness when he exhaled.

"Papa?"

He said nothing. Large hands covered her breasts. What was happening? She tried to scream, but couldn't force more than a whimper past her tight throat. Just a dream. She shut her eyes. When I open them again, she thought, I'll be awake.

She opened her eyes. He was still there. Touching her.

"No, Papa," she whispered, pulling at his hands. They didn't stop moving. She tried to roll away from him, but he wouldn't let her.

She sent up a silent prayer. Please, God, tell me what's happening. Why is he touching me? What should I do?

Beth held herself rigid and tried not to feel the hot hands on her skin. This couldn't be Papa. Her father would never do this. A smell like rotten fruit was coming from his mouth. It made her feel sick.

As hard as she could, she squeezed her eyes shut until phantom lights danced on her eyelids. Maybe she had to keep them closed longer before she could wake up. She was just having the worst dream ever.

She tried to ignore the sweaty hands moving along her cold body, the sound of his labored breathing. She gripped the sheets as he touched her in terrible ways. Beth couldn't think of what to do, couldn't think very well, didn't even want to think right now. She prayed and prayed, and he finally went away.

Morning light shone through the blinds and fell in narrow strips across her face. Beth blinked, stretched. The nightmare came back to her, and she bolted out of bed, looking fearfully around her room.

Nothing seemed any different, but she knew everything had changed: changed because it hadn't been a nightmare. Her heart racing, she jumped out of bed, knelt in front of the shrine, and began to plead for forgiveness and understanding.

The beads rattled in her hands as she said her rosary. One prayer with each hard orb, then the next. At first, she felt nothing of the touch of God's love. Oh no — had she done something so evil that He had forsaken her?

A memory of last night's probing hands shocked her into silence. She prayed more fervently, until the familiar rhythms chased the terrible visions away.

She searched for answers. Was her faith being tested? Tested like Christ's had been? If so, she should accept the challenge that had been set for her, and do her best to surrender to His will. As Christ had in Gethsemane. He had met His test, and had died on the cross. Had suffered for all of our sins. Had felt the nails pierce the flesh of His palms.

As she prayed, Beth could again feel the hands from last night touching her, the pressure of them on her breasts. She quit fighting the memory of the touch, welcomed both it and the comforting presence of God descending on her. She gave herself over to the two touches, and they became one.

Blood flowed from the tender flesh of Beth's nipples like the blood of Jesus had flowed from His hands. Red blotches appeared on the front of her nightgown and spread. The pain was much worse than the memory of her father's hands. The blood dripped from her nipples until it had cleansed away her sins. She cried out with the release.

Beth was able to get to the bathroom unseen. She scrubbed at her nightgown with a bar of soap until she had washed out the blood, then hung it up to dry in her closet. Before dressing in her blue school uniform, she folded tissues to put in her bra. The blood wasn't coming so fast now. As she left the house, she passed by the family room. She caught a glimpse of her father sitting on the sofa, elbows on knees, his face resting in his hands.

Beth hurried by the doorway and opened the front door. Her arm was wrenched backward.

"You can't tell a soul what happened." Her father's voice, low and close to her ear. "No one will believe you."

Stiffly, she nodded her head, pulled free, and ran down the front walk.

ST. STEPHEN'S was a cool refuge for her. Usually a moderately good student, Beth now lost concentration in her classes . . . all except religion.

She stayed at the library each afternoon to read all she could on the lives of the Saints. Spine straight against the wood of the chair, she sat at a library table, finding solace in the lives of the martyrs — Saint Agnes, Saint Cecilia, and the others who had given all to God. Day after day she read and reread the same tales, strengthening her own will through study of these examples.

For almost a week, Beth slept undisturbed through the night. She said nothing to her mother about her father's visit; she knew she could not. How could she tell anyone of the terrible thing she and her father had done? It was hers to bear alone; it was God's way of testing her. She would emerge from the trial with unshakable faith.

Her breasts healed rapidly: no scabs, no itching. This, too, was the hand of God.

Six nights later he came back. With his knee, he forced her legs apart. She felt his weight on top of her, pressing her into the mattress. There was an explosion of pain down there, then he was pushing himself onto her, grunting like some animal on "Wild Kingdom." He smelled awful, bitter and strong, not at all like Papa.

She remained silent, tears rolling down her cheeks and over her ears. Her hair was damp when he climbed off her bed. After the door was shut, she pulled the pillow over her face and cried into the soft whiteness, lifting it only to gasp for air.

In the morning she woke before dawn and prayed at her shrine. She asked God to forgive her, to accept her as still chaste. She besought the Son for His blessing. And was again answered in the strange new way.

Blood flowed down Beth's thighs. It was not her period again. The agony between her legs told her that, the searing lines of pain where deep gashes inched along the sensitive tissue. Her prayers were being answered. God had given her another sign, and with it she found sweet relief.

At lunchtime the next day, Beth went to the cafeteria and carried her tray toward an empty table in the corner.

"Beth! Over here." Carla waved to her. "Sit with us."

She hesitated, then smiled at her friend and went to join the group of other seventh-grade girls from her neighborhood. She sat next to Carla, across from Mary and Peg.

Mary, shaking her carton of milk and opening it, said, "You haven't been around at lunch."

"I've been in the library. Working on my report," Beth said. She busied herself with the tray, and the other girls went back to chattering. Beth barely listened until Mary kicked her under the table to get her attention.

"Did you hear what Judy told Arlene?" Mary said, looking around the table at the four other girls. "She went behind the public library with

Bobby Coleman and let him french-kiss her."

Beth bent over her plate, looking into the mound of mashed potatoes, feeling her face grow hot.

"That's sickening," said Carla.

"I heard Sister Ursula say Judy is bound to come to no good," said Peg.

Mary leaned forward and put her hand out to block her face from the rest of the table. "My brother says Judy is a little slut," she whispered.

Beth pushed back from the table. Her chair squeaked loudly. Everyone was looking at her. *A slut.*

"Where're you going?"

"I've got to study," she said, turning and bumping into the back of some little kid's chair behind her.

"Beth?" Carla said.

She walked away from the other girls as fast as she could, then ran down the hallway to the empty girls' rest room. *A slut.* Only bad girls let boys touch them like that. She sat in the stall with her eyes closed until she heard the bell ring.

That afternoon, Beth's teacher kept her after school. After all the others had left, Beth stood in front of the teacher's desk and looked at the intersecting lines of the tile floor, the hundreds of crosses drawn by those lines.

"Is there anything wrong, Beth? You seem so withdrawn lately."

Did it show? Had she become so bad that everyone else could see? She thought that God's gift was washing away her sins. "No, Sister."

"You hardly talk in class anymore."

Beth didn't answer. There was nothing she could say that her teacher would understand. She could feel Sister Bernadette staring at her, and prayed that nothing of her shame showed. "Can I go now?" she asked.

Sister hesitated for a moment. "Yes," she said.

Beth turned and left the classroom. On the way home, she stopped at church and sat for an hour, staring at the crucifix behind the altar, and wondering what God's plan was for her.

She suffered such sorrow from lying to her teacher. And while she had been praying more than ever before, she had avoided her last confession, too, claiming an upset stomach that her mother did not think to question. But God must want her to bear these burdens alone, else why would He give her this strange gift?

* * *

That night her father came to her bedroom again.

When the door opened, Beth snapped awake, her heart thudding as if from a bad dream. She watched his approach, a darker shadow in the dim room, a mass of blackness broken only by a single flash from his watch-band. She tried to make out his expression as he pulled off her blanket and sheet, but could find no new understanding from what little she saw.

Unlike the first two times, he spoke. "I know you're awake."

She didn't answer.

"I know what you want." He untied his bathrobe; she heard it rustle like a serpent as he let it fall to the floor. "Exactly what your sister did. You're just the same as her." He knelt on the bed, leaned over her face, and held the awful thing out to her. A finger wormed its way in between her teeth and forced her jaw down. With whispered orders and his own motion, he used her mouth. The entire time she prayed silently, finally falling back on a childhood prayer, the only words she could bring to mind.

It went on forever; then came a terrible taste. Holy Mother of God, what had he done in her mouth? He hurried from the room as she spit slime onto her pillow. She thought about the taste and gagged. Spit again, trying to be rid of it.

She ran to the bathroom, closed the door, and threw the lock. She pulled on the chain, and light flooded the room. Beth stood looking at the sink, finally forcing herself to glance into the mirror. After brushing her teeth, she went on to scrub at her gums and tongue. Beth stuck her face under the faucet and drank cold water until she couldn't swallow another drop, and then she let the water fill her mouth and drain out over and over again. Avoiding the reflection of her own eyes, she stared at her open mouth.

As she watched, blood welled up along the line of her gums. Bright red contrasted vividly with the white of her teeth. She stuck her tongue out and watched as it, too, turned red. Like an overfull sponge, her tongue began to ooze blood. Thin lines like paper cuts drew themselves onto the inside of her lips and bled. Beth wiped a trickle of red from her chin, then bowed her head and watched drops of blood splatter onto the porcelain. The acrid taste was her salvation.

All night, Beth knelt at her shrine with a washcloth, dabbing at her bleeding mouth and thanking God for His absolution — for this gift.

Even if she could not understand why He had granted her this, she had faith that He had His reasons. Finally, near morning, her patience was rewarded. From the cross, the ceramic Christ spoke to her in a dry, pained voice. "His reasons shall be revealed. When the time is right, Elizabeth." She stared at His head, hoping for more, but there were no more words. It was a miracle! For her, and her alone, to see.

Her mother was still awake when Beth was ready to leave for school.

"Let me make you some breakfast," she said.

"No, thanks," said Beth.

"You need a good meal to start the day."

Why this, of all mornings, did Mama have to want her to eat? Her mouth was too raw to even think about food. "I'm not hungry," Beth said, more sharply than she intended.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me, Elizabeth Ann. Remember your Commandments."

"I'm sorry. Just give me an apple. I'll eat it on my way to school."

Mother sighed and handed her the fruit. "You're getting to be just as bad as Monica."

Her father walked into the kitchen. Beth turned away from him. Except for last night in the dark, it had been weeks since she had been willing to look at her father's face. He sat down at the table, and Beth left the room. She heard her mother say, "Why do children have to grow up to be teenagers?"

Beth pushed down the start of anger by whispering an Our Father. She eased the front door shut.

Beth had trouble going to sleep. She was afraid to lie down in bed and close her eyes. Her father seemed to come to her only when she was already in bed.

She knelt at the shrine and sought a direction, a way out of her torment. The Christ stayed quiet, but that was O.K. It was up to Beth to be patient. Should she tell her mother? She was certain not. Should she try to run away from home? Beth knew that was a stupid idea — where could she possibly run to? She obviously had been given the answer from Heaven — it was this gift of blood, like the blood of Christ. She just didn't know how the gift could help her. God had given her the means, but not the

way to salvation; it was hers to find the way.

It was after midnight, and Beth was deep in her soothing communion with God, when her father came in the room. She crossed herself and gripped her rosary. Maybe he wouldn't bother her if he saw she was praying. But he turned off the light and walked to her side.

He bent, took her arm, brought her to her feet, and pushed her toward the bed. She stumbled, but big hands kept her from falling. Her nightgown was torn over her head. His hands moved down to her breasts.

She sensed God's gift again, more strongly than ever. It was coming to her, and she welcomed it and rejoiced.

Her father pulled her to the bed, and she fell onto it. He climbed on top of her, smothering her with his bulk. He kissed Beth, but not like a father. His tongue forced its way into her mouth.

Beth felt as if she were trying to expand inside of her skin. She heard a noise like the hissing of a thousand candle flames, then the power of God rushed into her.

A flood of sensations swept over Beth, lifted her: her nipples and tongue began to seep with wetness that she knew was blood. The pain between her legs changed as the wounds she inflicted on herself overwhelmed the worldly hurt from her father.

He forced his way inside her body, moving on her, seemingly unaware of Beth's gift. But she saw now that it might stop him — both stop him and absolve her — and so she let it become her strength.

With her mind she groped for her womb, made it collapse and turn to a pool of tissue and blood. The raw mass slid down her vagina. Explosions in blood vessels along the surface of her eyes blinded her. Her father kept thrusting. She opened her mouth to cry out, but it filled with a torrent of blood. She gasped for air, but the hot liquid turned to acid.

The gift was all through her now; she could not stop it, should not stop it. The skin of her inner thighs split open. The wounds wept blood. She thrilled to the pain of Christ on the cross as invisible nails pierced her hands and feet. Tendons snapped in her legs. A harsh twisting along her spine made her clutch her rosary more tightly. The beads punched through her palm. Blood ran from between her legs like a fountain.

I believe in Jesus Christ, she thought through the agony. Something collapsed in her chest. Redeemed! She was redeemed.

Her father's screams could not touch her silent prayer.

England's Bob Shaw offers a delightfully funny tale about a shapely young woman, her three suitors — a warrior, a poet, and a scientist — and their confrontation with something monstrous . . .

Lunch of Champions

By Bob Shaw

DARSKADER WOOD WAS quite small compared to the forests that covered much of the land of Perithrya — but it had a dark and fearsome reputation. Its name was a corruption of “dallrish kadree,” which in the Old Tongue (unheard in Perithrya for a thousand years) meant “waiting mouth.” Stories had been handed down from generation to generation about travelers who had set out on the sunless path through Darskader Wood, and who had never been seen again. Quite a few of the tales told of despairing howls of terror filtering through the trees; and in some rare variations, there was talk of a strange sound that could be described only as a kind of *munching*. Those who claimed to have heard it had been reluctant to use that word, simply because the unpleasant sound had been so powerful that it had caused the ground to shake.

One might think, in view of the above, that the path that led through Darskader Wood would be shunned by any reasonably prudent person. But it was the shortest route between two important towns in southern

Perithrya, and it was the way of human beings everywhere — especially the young — to believe that tragedy and horror can overtake only others. Let a few years pass, let time bleach eyewitness accounts into the pale watercolors of fading memory, and — lo! — every aspect of creation is fair and good.

Thus it was that on a fine summer morning in the month of Oppro, in the year 4849 HL, four young people were riding unconcernedly through the center of Darskader Wood. . . .

One of them was Lady Mornora, only daughter of a minor nobleman who had secured for himself a small estate by dint of a lifetime of service to the local demiking. What Mornora may have lacked in rank in Perithryan nobility, she more than made up for in personal attributes. Although inclined to be a trifle haughty and impatient, she was beautiful, shapely, and of a generous disposition.

With her was Jervan Brightsword, the demiking's personal champion, a fair-haired giant who had never been defeated in any kind of close combat. He could weave a glittering and impenetrable wall around himself with a sword, and was so strong that he was reputed to have killed an attacker's horse with a single punch. He was probably the bravest warrior in the whole of Perithrya, and he was openly pressing for Mornora's hand in marriage.

Also accompanying Mornora on the journey through Darskader Wood was Olfid Dreamweave, a slender young man of brooding eye and heavy black locks, who was famed throughout the land for the emotional intensity and technical perfection of his poetry. Many honors had been bestowed upon him by the demiking, and it was widely rumored that he was soon to take up residence in the royal court. He, too, was one of Mornora's most ardent suitors.

Her third companion on that fateful morning was a thin, round-shouldered, sour-tongued individual known as Hoggo Stargaup. Hoggo was a member of the Guild of Astronomers, and had a stringy build and pallid complexion that were widely attributed to his nocturnal habits. Others who knew him better put his unfortunate appearance down to a fondness for smoking the exotic weeds that he cultivated in the walled garden behind his decaying mansion.

He, too, was enamored of the young noblewoman, and in fact, he had been the first to volunteer to accompany her on the ride to Arturova,

the town that lay on the far side of Daraskader Wood. He was far too practical to pay any attention to the area's unsavory reputation — to him, the journey was only notionally dangerous — and he had seen it as a chance for a physical coward to impress a desirable woman with his courage. When Brightsword and Dreamweave had opportunistically attached themselves to the excursion, he had been outraged, knowing that — to use astronomical metaphors — he would be eclipsed and outshone by them.

In consequence, as the ride progressed, he became morose and withdrawn in contrast to his companions, whose cheerful conversation and laughter echoed through the palisades of trees. Mornora was enjoying having two illustrious suitors competing for her smiles, and Hoggo — now wishing he had remained at home — was trailing behind, twisting his face into a baleful mask of disgust and resentment at every outburst of merriment.

At one point close to the center of the wood, Jervan glanced back over a broad shoulder and called out, "Why do you lag so much, Hoggo? Is that flea-bitten old mare of yours no longer able to walk?"

"She may be losing some of her former powers, but not of discrimination," Hoggo replied. "She is reluctant to go too close to a beast that might forcibly disturb the peaceful state of her private parts."

Jervan laughed. "Then she has no reason to fear anything — my horse is a gelding."

"Who said it was the horse's attentions she was dreading?" Hoggo snickered into the back of his hand.

Jervan replayed the conversation in his memory, and after a considerable time, a dangerous crease appeared on his suntanned brow. "Is it possible, Hoggo, that you dare to insult me?"

"Perish the thought!" Hoggo said in tones of sincerity. "If I wanted to sharpen my wit on somebody, I would choose a much more difficult subject than you."

"I accept your apology," Jervan said, gently slapping the sword that hung at his side. "But be careful in the future."

"I'll do that, *sire!*" Hoggo gave a secretive and contemptuous grin that somehow drew special attention from Olfid Dreamweave.

"You seem to regard yourself as very clever with words," Olfid reproved, slowing his horse to allow Hoggo to come alongside him. "But let me assure you, you can never aspire to be a poet such as I."

"Does anyone *aspire* to be a poet such as you?" Hugo said in tones of innocent wonderment. "Wouldn't that be somewhat akin to praying for scalpworm or fire-crotch?"

"You go too far, sirrah!" Olfid cried, his already pale features growing luminescent with anger. "I demand an immediate apology — otherwise I shall challenge you to a duel!"

"Pay the stargazer no heed," Mornora said to Olfid. "He has been in one of his peculiar moods ever since we set out. Perhaps he is suffering from eyestrain."

"There isn't much chance of my straining any other organ around here," Hoggo muttered. He had intended the remark — a comment on Mornora's rejection of his amorous advances — for his ears only, but in the silence of the wood, his words were clearly audible to all present.

Mornora gasped, perhaps indicating that her mind was less chaste than her body, and that was the cue for Olfid to grasp the reins of Hoggo's horse, bringing the whole party to an abrupt halt.

"You have insulted Lady Mornora, the sweetest flower of maidenhood in this kingdom, nay — in the whole of creation!" Olfid cried out.

"In the whole of creation?" Hoggo said, tilting his head in thought. "Is that not going a trifle far? She is highly delectable — I'll give you that — but when you consider the number of inhabited worlds that there must be in this galaxy, and the number of galaxies in the —"

"*Silence!*" Olfid's finely chiseled features, thought to be too womanly by some, had hardened into white marble. "Your offensiveness has gone beyond all bounds."

"Are you going to challenge me to a duel?" Hoggo sneered. "I would remind you that you have no cream pastries to throw."

"What is this?" Jervan bellowed, massive chest swelling as he belatedly realized that Hoggo was being more odious than usual. "Should my sword seek a new and bloody sheath?"

"Perhaps," Hoggo said nastily, "but if it finds the right one, you might never again enjoy the pleasures of riding to hound."

Jervan frowned as he tried to work out whether or not he had been insulted, but the quick-witted Mornora rounded on Hoggo immediately.

"You and your filthy tongue go too far, Stargaup," she said, her normally soft voice becoming imperious. "Leave my presence without delay, or I will. . . ."

The punishment she had in mind for Hoggo remained a matter of conjecture, because in that very instant — with an appalling thunderous sound — the path a short distance ahead of the group erupted. A rounded object, large as a haystack, thrust its way up through the ground, spilling earth from its sides and causing the nearest trees to waver and sway. The object continued to rise for a few dread seconds until it was obvious to the terrified quartet that it was the head of a subterranean giant. After a few more seconds, the shoulders and misshapen gray arms of the monstrosity, having displaced great quantities of soil and broken rock, were above ground.

There its ascension ceased, but there was no lessening of the peril that faced the four travelers. One of the giant's hands shot forward with incredible speed and snatched Mornora from her saddle. Her horse promptly bolted off into the trees, and the other startled animals backed away, barely under the control of their riders. The giant raised the struggling figure of Mornora to its mouth — and for one fell moment, the three watching men were paralyzed with dread, believing that she was about to be devoured on the spot.

But the giant hesitated, a smile spreading across its hideous features, and it lowered Mornora to the ground, while still keeping its fingers around her. Its skin had the color and texture of basalt, and its eyes had the dull red glow of congealing lava. Its mouth was a dark cave, lined with jagged gray spikes as large as tombstones. Suddenly, and silently, the monster spoke.

What have we here? came the soundless roar that echoed with telepathic force inside the watchers' skulls. *Three fine specimens of manhood, if I am not mistaken. Three contenders for the lady's hand in marriage.*

Until that point, Jervan, Olfid, and Hoggo had believed themselves to have been confronted by the worst of all possible nightmares, one that had been translated into dreadful reality; but all at once it dawned on them that — thus far — they had been troubled by nothing more than the corporeal aspect of the terrible being. What was worse than its ghastly physical appearance, *immeasurably worse*, was the aura of pure evil that surrounded it. The three young men knew themselves to be in the presence of an entity that was diametrically opposed to all that was good and fine and noble in the fretful story of human existence. Every virtue that

mankind had ever cherished was scorned and negated by it, and now the core of their whole system of belief was being challenged.

My name is Tanas, the giant announced in silent thunder, and I have in my hand a choice morsel of life-fodder — the first in several decades tasty enough to rouse me from the long sleep. I now propose to eat her . . . savoring the texture of every delicate organ . . . sucking the marrow from every bone. . . .

Should you be foolhardy enough to try to interfere with my repast, I will devour you as well.

What have you to say to that?

The import of the silent message must also have been clear to Mornora, because her struggles to escape the giant's clutch suddenly intensified. On seeing the maiden's frantic writhings, Jervan — veteran of a thousand desperate conflicts — drew his sword and urged his horse forward. The loyal animal, although trembling with fright, edged itself closer to the terrible figure that loomed over the travelers.

"Here's what I have to say to you, Tanas, you foul excrescence," Jervan cried, eyes flashing no less brightly than the blade he carried. "You believe yourself to be invincible, but I have looked deep into your black soul and have discerned your weakness. You rely on your hideous aspect and your aura of evil to disconcert your enemies, to render them helpless before you.

"Know you now — O Tanas — that in me, you have finally met your match. I have no fear of you! For you, I feel nothing but hatred and contempt, and I go against you secure in the knowledge that you will be vanquished by the threefold power of a stout heart, a strong right arm, and the finest sword in all of Perithrya."

With those words, Jervan leaped down from his horse and, golden locks streaming behind him, ran toward the awesome giant. On perceiving what he was about, Mornora — still imprisoned by enormous fingers — turned her gaze in his direction.

"Save yourself, noble Jervan," she implored, "for I am most surely beyond the reach of all human aid."

"You have forgotten one thing, my lady." Jervan's voice rang out across the scene, deep and strong. "The power of hatred! We humans are a warrior race at heart. We hate very well — better than any other species — and it is the unique power of that hatred that one day will enable us to conquer the myriad stars."

*That's a shame, the monstrous shape replied,
because I rather like you.*

Taking his mightily sword in a two-handed grip, Jervan faced up to his awesome antagonist. "And now, Tanas, prepare to feel the full force of my *hatred*! I *loathe* you! I *despise* you! I *abominate* you!"

That's a shame, the monstrous shape replied, because I rather like you.

It demonstrated the truth of its silent statement by picking Jervan up in its free hand and biting off the top half of his body. It munched several times, causing the ground to shake, then crammed the rest of him into its maw, tucking the legs in with one fingertip in a gesture of obscene delicacy.

Mornora screamed and covered her eyes. Hoggo Stargaup, who had been petrified with horror throughout the course of events, gathered his reins in preparation for flight. He was about to apply the spurs, when, to his utter astonishment, he saw that Olfid Dreamweave was descending from the saddle.

"What are you *doing*?" Hoggo said in a frantic whisper. "It behooves us to get away from this place with the utmost speed."

"Never," Olfid said as he opened his saddlebag and took a small object from it. A deathly pallor had settled on his fine-chiseled features, but in his eyes there was a look of unshakable resolution.

"It's not as if we can *do* anything to help Mornora," Hoggo urged. "You saw what happened to Jervan."

"Jervan was a brave man, but he was a fool to believe that evil could ever be overcome by a base emotion such as hate. It is *love* that is the greatest force in the whole of creation and that has the power to conquer all."

Hoggo's jaw sagged as he saw that Olfid had taken from his saddlebag a small shagreen-covered book. He tried to utter a warning as Olfid, holding the book aloft, walked slowly toward the waiting monster, but no sound escaped his lips. Mornora, for her part, was less debilitated.

"No, my dear Olfid," she cried. "You must not sacrifice yourself for me! Can't you see that it is all in vain?"

"Have no fear, my lady," Olfid replied in ringing tones, his slender figure upright and unafraid. "I have here a weapon a thousand times keener than the finest sword."

You arouse my interest, the monster said, its tongue making a coarse scraping sound as it licked blood from its lower lip. Pray tell me the nature of this insignificant-looking device. Is it, perhaps, a grenade?

"Nay! More powerful than any military chemistry is this compilation of my most beautiful poems," Olfid answered, continuing to stride forward.

"In my hand is the ultimate expression of love. Love of nature's beauty, love of truth and wisdom, and — above all — the pure and eternal love that I feel for Lady Mornora. It is an emotion that will forever be beyond your understanding, Tanas, and it will destroy you utterly. I call on the power of love, in all its transcendent glory, to—"

Olfid's burst of rhetoric came to an end as the giant snatched him up and ate him. Probably because he was much lighter than Jervan, the horrendous monster was able to dispose of him as a single mouthful.

The poet held me in low regard, came its silent gloating. But I hope I showed that I had a great fondness for him and his work.

At that, Mornora gave a wail of despair, almost as though something in the form of the silent words had depressed her spirit more than the thought of death itself. She turned her beautiful face toward Hoggo, and her clear blue eyes besought him.

"Hoggo," she cried fervently. "You have seen the fate that has befallen my two champions — each in his own way infinitely superior to you. I implore you not to squander your life, such as it is, in a futile attempt to succor me."

This grows better and better, Tanas chimed in. I can hardly believe my good fortune! The beauteous maiden, by showing an unexpected regard for the lowly one's welfare, inexorably binds him to her. I have not had such sport in a hundred years, because — delectable though the flesh of my victims may be — the true sustenance, the nourishment vital to my very existence, is derived from their emotions, their feelings. Without those infusions of the spiritual essence, my corporeal body would soon become as one with the lifeless clay that surrounds me.

Come now, Hoggo Stargaup!

What say you to the Lady Mornora! With what noble sentiments and inspiring words will you sally forth in an attempt to succor her and thus swell the contents of my stomach! Speak now, because in this fateful instant, you command our full attention. . . .

"I have only one word for you," Hoggo called out after only a moment's deliberation. "Good-bye!"

Mornora pressed her hands to her shocked and distraught countenance. "What are you saying, Hoggo?"

"Are you going deaf?" Hoggo said peevishly. "I told you I'm getting out of here while the going's good."

At those words, the giant shuddered, causing the ground to quake, and its ruddy eyes blazed in what may have been anger. Hoggo backed his horse an extra few paces.

"But what about all your protestations of love?" Mornora cried, her anguish waxing as she saw him preparing to leave. "How can you abandon me in my hour of need?"

"Love! Hour of need!" Hoggo sneered. "Don't talk to me about such things! What about that night only last week when the moon had inflamed my passions almost beyond a man's power of endurance? How did you respond to my ardor? You told me to sit in a bath of cold water. In fact, if memory serves me correctly, you also advocated shoveling snow into it!"

"But Hoggo. . . ."

Mornora's words were lost as her captor gave another terrible shudder. From the center of its evil being, there came a silent roar in which Hoggo — rather to his surprise — thought he could discern elements of dismay.

What manner of talk is this! the monstrous ogre cried. *What are these strange emotions that attack my sensibilities like vitriol! I have never encountered their like before.*

"That's because you have never met a pig like Hoggo before," Mornora said, her fears for her own safety forgotten for the moment as she gazed at Hoggo in contempt. "He is — without doubt — the most lecherous, cowardly, meanspirited, ugly, ungrateful, and foulmouthed wretch in the whole of Perithrya."

"And those are only *some* of my good points," Hoggo replied with a ghastly leer.

There came another soundless bellow from Tanas, and this time there was no mistaking the accompanying note of pain and revulsion. *What is this corrosive venom that burns the very fabric of my mind! You call it . . . sarcasm!*

"It is the only commodity with which Stargaup has ever been generous," Mornora said angrily.

"While you are in this rare mood for candor, darling Mornora," Hoggo said in tones that mocked sweetness, "why don't you tell your gigantic friend — whose face so much resembles a heap of desiccated cow droppings — about some of your own little shortcomings?"

"Such as?"

"Such as your overfondness for spiritous liquors. Do you imagine that anybody *believes* your claim that it is rose water you carry in that flask that never leaves your side?"

"At least," Mornora said, "it is natural to enjoy the products of the vine — which is more than can be said for your foul and perverted habit of inhaling —"

Enough, enough! I cannot endure these caustic outpourings, came the giant's distressed call. In the past, my appetite has always been enhanced by humanity's noble and heroic emotions: love . . . courage . . . selflessness . . . What have I done to warrant such a fate! Never before have I had to stomach such noxious and bitter condiments. . . .

The giant raised its left arm, which was as thick as the trunk of a mighty tree, to cover its face. Mornora, who until that instant had been resigned to death, experienced a sudden stirring of hope as she felt the enormous fingers of the other hand slightly relax their grasp on her waist.

"Hoggo," she gasped, taking advantage of the giant's preoccupation with its internal turmoil, "continue in the same vein! It appears that exposure to your essential character and personality produces the same effect on Tanas as on any human being; that is to say — utter revulsion. Your unique blend of cowardice, treacherousness, lewdness, selfishness, insolence, stupidity, and general unpleasantness may yet prove to be my salvation."

"Did you say stupidity?" Hoggo queried with a scowl. "I am not sure that I like that."

"Never mind," Mornora said urgently. "Just keep on hurling your cruel insults at me! Make them up if necessary!"

"In your case, there is little need to tax my powers of invention," Hoggo said ungallantly. "I have never mentioned this before — because it would have queered my chances of crawling beneath your coverlets — but you tend to be somewhat lacking in personal freshness. Not to put too fine a point on it, a blind man entering your presence at the height of summer would be hard put to say whether he was approaching a maiden or a midden."

"Is that a fact?"

"Oh yes," Hoggo went on, warming to his task. "In times of war, your armpits could be employed in the defense of the realm."

What a way to speak to a lady! the giant quavered. *What is the world coming to!*

"You do very well, Hoggo," Mornora commented, though with a certain stiffness creeping into her voice. "Keep going!"

Hoggo nodded. "There is also your dress sense, or lack of same — has nobody ever told you that it's a mistake to wear black with dandruff? And as for the underhand methods you use at the gaming table! I don't know which is the more deplorable — the cheating itself, or the clumsiness with which you go about it."

Mornora gasped and was about to issue a heated reply, when her hideous captor emitted a moan of pure anguish. *No more of this, I beg you,* came its silent whimper. *My brain! My poor stomach!*

"And then, my dear Mornora," Hoggo pressed on, relentless as a warrior closing for the kill, surrounded by a shining psychic aura of pure spitefulness, "there is your well-known frigidity — at least as far as the opposite sex is concerned. Rumors have circulated far and wide about. . . ."

Aarrghh! With a final bleat of misery, loathing, and despair, the giant released its hold on Mornora, clapped its hand to its mouth, and began to sink down into the great cavity whence it had emerged. Mornora darted to safety on the instant, coming to a halt close to Hoggo just as the giant disappeared from view to the accompaniment of nauseated choking sounds. Loose soil and rocks tumbled in to complete the interment, and a hushed silence descended over Darskader Wood.

"What a victory!" Hoggo exulted, swinging down from his mare to stand beside Mornora. "This day will go down in history. Did you observe the speed and skill with which I fashioned my tongue into the deadliest of weapons?"

"I certainly did," Mornora said in an oddly subdued voice.

Hoggo turned to her and drew her closer to him. "And now, my lady, what reward have you in mind for your champion?"

"This!" Mornora, showing a most unladylike aptitude for close combat, drove her right knee into Hoggo's groin with devastating force. He gave an agonized cry, then sank to the ground, clutching himself with both hands, and watched openmouthed as she — discovering that the other

horses had fled — swung herself up onto his mare and prepared to ride away.

"But . . . but . . ." Hoggo gagged a couple of times before he could complete a sentence. "Why do you abuse me so?"

"What do you expect after the way you abused me! I've never been so insulted in all my life!"

"But I did it only to save you from the monster."

"That's what you say, but it was obvious that you were enjoying yourself," Mornora snapped, transfixing Hoggo with a look of fury and scorn. "Rather than utter such scurrilous remarks, a true nobleman would have preferred to see me die!"

"All of a sudden, I seem to be developing the instincts of a nobleman," Hoggo gritted. "If you will kindly descend from my horse, I will be happy to kill you myself."

"You murderous, misogynistic swine!" Mornora cried. "As soon as I get to Arturova, I will report your threat to the sheriff. I will bring him back here without delay, with the intention of having you beheaded, or, at the very least, imprisoned in a foul dungeon for the rest of your worthless life!"

With those words, she goaded the steed into motion and galloped away, leaving Hoggo to fend for himself in the dark loneliness of the wood. He tried to make an obscene parting gesture, but a secondary wave of pain arising from his nether regions caused him to fall on his side. He lay still for a moment, then began pounding the ground with his fist.

"Can you hear me down there, Tanas, my old friend?" he called out. "The Lady Mornora has just departed, but she is soon to return. Do you think that you and I might come to some mutually satisfactory arrangement . . . ?"



This short and surprising SF tale comes from R. P. Bird, who writes that he is a tall fellow, a graduate student in history and a struggling professional writer. To him, history and fiction are related, like the opposite sides of the same coin ...

Illness in a Word

By R. P. Bird

INCREASINGLY, THE DEBATES in the Council of Thirty-seven have become more and more vociferous. It worries me, but I have spoken to no one of it. When I was young, before the humans came into our lives, the oratory in Council was less inflamed. I consoled myself by remembering that we are not habitually violent creatures. It was forbidden by custom to engage in violence with another councillor. Further, since the Urmani archonship, before the Age of Spaceflight, all intraspecies violence has been circumscribed — unless, of course, one was granted a government sanction.

We were returning from Council along the ancient and green paths that led to my summer villa. I could see that my human was quite agitated. They are like children, even to their size. My body slave's name was Holand. He was tall for his kind, yet no more than a yearling's height. "What is it, Child?"

"Master, I heard the insults Kor-Keiimani hurled at you from the speaking circle. Yet you had no reply! How can you endure such abuse?"

I stopped. My tail flicked about in irritation as I soothed down the feathers on my flanks. I suppressed its movement. "What might I do, Child?"

"I . . . I do not know." He bowed his head. Holand realized he had spoken out of turn. I was glad he found it unnecessary to cower. Other Maniquad took pride in the intricate patterns of scars their whips brought up on human backs. I preferred my slaves unblemished. Some of my peers preferred white slaves to dark because the scarification was more prominent on white bodies. Humans are intelligent after a fashion; they can be trained to behave. As to colors, I actually preferred the brown. Over half my retinue were brown. All were unblemished, even the white ones.

"He insulted you. What of your honor?" he said, his head still bowed.

"These matters are of no concern to you! Maniquad need no interference in their affairs by slaves. I must insist you speak no more of this. I have great affection for you, Holand. I have great affection for the entire household, but I will impose discipline if I hear any more of this nonsense. Do you understand, Child?"

"Yes, Master."

We proceeded to my residence in silence, my anger slowly dissipating. I paused at the gate to admire the intricate carvings in the dark wood of the arch. By tradition, it was replaced every year. The new arch had been up only a day, and I had already received compliments on its convoluted beauty. I was renowned for breeding the best human carvers. This would only increase their value.

Inside, under the peaked roof of my fathers, I was tended to. My slaves soothed my feathers and sang softly as I was fed. The shutters were open so that I might admire the garden, with its scented plants and colorful flowers. Some were also imports from the humans' planet. It was a fortuitous voyage that took our sojourners to the ruined Earth. They found humanity, desolate and huddled, among the fumes and radiations. Out of kindness, we extracted them and gave humanity a purpose. To serve. They were the best by far of all the others we had ever used. They were so short-lived, though. I discounted the hard labor they did as a factor in shortening their lives. Others have disagreed, but I contend that hard work is good for slaves.

After the evening meal, I concerned myself with the reports that would be taken up at the next Council. They contained many accounts of duel-

ing among the humans. It was forbidden for humans to damage each other, since by doing so they depreciated their value to us. Yet it continued; according to some, quite widespread. I summoned Holand.

"Yes, Master?"

"Do you duel, Holand?"

"I do nothing out of pleasure for myself, sir. Only what is necessary for you."

I took that as a no. "Come lie by me, Holand. Stroke my feathers and sing me a song."

His soft voice and kind hands guided me to Cu-uth-alan, the place of dreams, where I conversed with my ancestors. They alarmed me by speaking of the Old Times, of blood and honor, of vengeance and holy war. They wished to instruct me in the Old Ways. I refused. They stomped and shouted with anger until I relented and began to practice the ancient killing arts. As each bony one certified me to advance to the next level, it was celebrated with laughter and dancing. My family's ghosts capered with delight. They had been denied for many generations the blood feast that is their due. Now they hoped they would eat long and drink deep.

I was awakened by my servants. They were afraid, and some were injured. The story was quickly told to me.

After my body had lain quiet for a time, Holand went to the kitchen. Many of my servants were gathered there. Holand told them of the Council meeting.

"This is beyond belief!" they said. "Our master did nothing? We cannot let this rest. Something must be done."

"I agree," Holand announced. "What have we if we have not honor? Our honor is worth more than our lives, even more than our Earth. Did not our venerable ancestors teach us this? They sacrificed their lives, their fortunes, their planet, and their freedom for honor. Our master does not understand; we must stand in his place and defend his honor. We go when the moons rise."

When the three crescents of our moons were in the sky, they left. Only the best, the strongest, left with Holand. The rest stayed to watch over me as I lay in the darkness, among pillows and colored hangings, my soul with my ancestors. Holand, my Holand, led them.

Other humans waited before the residence of Kor-Keiimani. Their leader stood before his group as Holand stood before my slaves.

"We seek satisfaction," Holand said.

"We know. You will receive it. The servants of Kor-Keiimani know their responsibilities," the other one replied.

They both drew hand spades from beneath their tunics. Originally made for garden work, their edges had been sharpened. Only humans could take a simple garden tool and give it a sinister purpose. All the humans had weapons in their hands; even paving stones were used.

They charged each other. It became a tightly interwoven waltz, swarming, swirling, and spinning. A silent little melee as males and females hacked at each other in a frenzy of hate. The small sounds of blows echoed around faintly in the night. Under the three crescent moons, in the timid bit of light they gave, Holand lunged again and again at the other male, trying for a quick victory. His opponent stumbled back, falling into the mob. Holand pushed in after him. In a tangle of bodies, his personal combat became a wrestling contest. Blades close to their bodies, hands grasping for an advantage. One was found. Someone cried out. The others stopped to see.

Holand was triumphant over the other one, who lay huddled on the ground, clutching a hand to the wound in his side.

"Stop this! You will all be disciplined!" Kor-Keiimani shouted from the doorway, having been aroused by the cries of his servant. The feathers about his neck were puffed up in anger. "Light! I want light in the courtyard!" Some slave triggered the illumination; the courtyard was flooded in bright light. He saw his beloved at the feet of Holand and rushed down the stone steps to him. He hurled Holand aside with a blow, unmindful of its effects, his eyes on his treasured servant.

As Kor-Keiimani cared for his injured slave, my servants tried to rouse Holand from where the blow had thrown him. I interrupted their story to ask: "Where is Holand?" They would not say at first. "Where is Holand?" They found him dead. They ran away then.

No more would I hear his voice raised in song; no more would his hands soothe my feathers and caress my face. They were so afraid they left the body behind.

Someone outside struck the guest bell. As its tone was heard in the house, some of my slaves cringed, as if fearing a mere sound.

"Bring the caller to me," I ordered. This was done. A human sauntered in, too casual by far. He smirked at my slaves, and overall acted above himself.

"Look to your station, human!" I cried out.

"Perhaps you should look to your own. My master, Kor-Keiimani, demands your immediate presence at his dwelling."

"I will comply, and your insolent behavior will be on my lips when I arrive there."

Kor's messenger had the temerity to strut away without any word of leaving. My slaves made a move toward him, but by my voice I maintained their discipline. The messenger left unharmed.

For a moment I was drawn back to Cu-uth-alan, the dream place, where I witnessed my ancestors capering and leaping in the Blood Dance, their shouts of encouragement directed at me. They left me, and I saw my humans standing before me. I do not know why I gave the order for all but the old and the tiny to follow me to Kor-Keiimani's house. Behind my eyes, my ancestors shouted with joy. I did not need to tell them to bring weapons; they knew. The gardener opened his shed and stood by it, handing forth all the sharp instruments into the hands of my humans, his fellow humans. They followed me, all of us passing under the carved arch of the gate.

The moons had set; we walked in the deep black of the night with only the lanterns to light our way. They had been placed along the paths at public expense to aid the traveler at night. I had never before bothered to notice the yellow tint to their light. To some, the color would be a comfort in the dark. My legs carried me far out in front; I was too anxious for this rendezvous. Holand's face had been a delight I had not cherished enough.

Kor-Keiimani's compound was lit and astir with movement. From his gateway, I could see him standing on the steps to his dwelling. Behind me, I could hear my followers. I did not wait; I strode in.

As I came near Kor, without preamble he began to speak: "I demand discipline for your servants, Tsi-Tokkmani. They have sinned greatly."

A shape lay a short distance from the steps. Kor's slaves fell back as I approached it. Holand's body lay in the dirt. I had imagined that my humans, silly as they sometimes were, had judged him dead who was merely unconscious. This was not so. I felt my internal organs compressed and a vacuum left in their place. I knelt down by his small body.

Kor continued to speak, assuming that I was listening: "They are arrogant whelps, your slaves. You should show them more leadership, Tsi-Tokkmani. It is as I said in Council: you are too weak. These servants

of yours came to this place to commit violence. They broke the covenant."

His little body was light in my arms. My ancestors whispered to me. Softly, ever so softly. Like dripping water before the flood. In front: the memories of Holand's soft touch, the echoes of his voice as it sang. Behind, like an accompanying musical instrument: the scratchy, tinny voices of my ancestors as they whispered. I held him a moment longer before lowering him back into the dirt.

Kor spoke again: "Listen to me; I will present these events to the Council for judgment. I regret this one's death. Your weakness caused it. If this one had not injured my servant, I would not have struck him so violently. An accident. I did not mean to kill it."

Anger began to mold my features. I had never felt it before in this way. The power of hate had entered me. My head echoed with the chants of my ancestors. Each syllable, each guttural sound, banged into my head, each time doubling in magnitude, increasing in force, dominating.

"Holand!" I shouted as I sprang upon Kor-Keimani.

I killed him with my bare hands. I tore at his eyes. With my beak, I ripped at his throat. His ineffectual grapples slid off my feathered shoulders. Praise my ancestors, praise their instruction! With my tail, I imprisoned a leg. One eye blinded, he tried to scream, but my beak once again sought his throat and pierced flesh. I let his body drop.

My followers had routed the enemy and were now in the midst of the slave quarters. Their lust was mine; the screams of the dying swam in the night. My sainted ancestors laughed and danced. I would teach my followers that dance. I would teach them more: the shaping of spikes and spears, for one. Weapons to kill my kind. I would summon all my followers, from all my farms and factories; I would teach them all. When next the Council meets, then might I have something to show them.

The bloodletting was over; the screams in the slave quarters had ceased. My people came back to me, the gardening tools covered in red, their hands red, all red. The gardener spoke for them: "The murderers are dead, High One. Praise you! What are your wishes?"

I gave orders. "Set spies upon the paths to look for the night watch; the commotion may have alarmed those nearby. Quickly! Put the enemy in their dwellings and set them afire. Pick up all our dead. I will bear Holand back myself." They paused. Something more must be said. "Be proud; we have taken back our honor." They hurried to obey me.

Here is a haunting new story by Kathe Koja, who wrote "Reckoning," (July 1990). Ms. Koja's new novel, THE CIPHER, was recently published by Dell (and reviewed here in the February issue).

The Neglected Garden

By Kathe Koja

I DON'T WANT TO go," she said. "I'm not going." Patient and calm, the way he wanted to be, he explained again: they had discussed it; she was moving out. He had already packed her things for her, five big cardboard boxes, labeled; he had done the best he could. Clothes on hangers and her big Klee print wrapped and tied carefully across with string, everything neatly stacked in the car. "Here," he said. "Here're the keys."

"I don't want the car," she said. Tears ran down her face, but she made no crying kind of sounds; her breathing did not change; in fact, her expression did not change. She stood there staring at him with rolling tears and her hands empty, palms upward, at her sides. He kissed her, a little impatiently, on her mouth.

"You have to go," he said. "Please, Anne, we've gone all through this. Let's not make it any harder than it already is." Although, in fact, it wasn't all that hard, not for him, anyway. "Please." And he leaned forward but did not kiss her again; her lips were unpleasantly wet.

She stared at him, saying nothing. He began to feel more than impatient — angry, in fact — but no, he would say nothing, either; he would give as good as he got. He put her car keys in her hand, literally closing her fingers around them, and, picking up his own keys, left the house. An hour or so, he would come back, and she would be gone.

When he got back, her car was still in the driveway, but she was nowhere in the house, not upstairs, not in the utility room, nowhere. Feeling a little silly, he looked in the closets, even considered looking under the bed: nothing. "Anne." Calling her, louder and louder, "Anne, stop it. Where are you?" Walking through the house, and a movement, something in the backyard, caught his eye through the big kitchen windows. Letting the screen door slam, hard, walking fast, and then seeing her, stopping as if on the perilous lip of a fire.

She was on the fence. The back fence, old now and leaning, half its braces gone. She sat at the spot where the rotted wood ended and the bare fencing began, legs straight out, head tipped just slightly to the right. Her arms were spread in a loose posture of crucifixion, and through the flesh of her wrists, she had somehow pierced the rusty wire of the fence, threading it around the tendons, the blood rich and thick and bright like some strange new food, and while he stood there staring and staring, a fly settled down on the blood and walked around in it, back and forth.

He kept staring at the fly — it was suddenly so hot in the yard; it was as if he couldn't see, or could see only half of the scene before him, a kind of dazzle around the perimeters of his vision like the beginning of a fainting fit — and back and forth went the fly, busy little black feet, and he screamed, "Son of a bitch," and moved to slap the fly away, and as his hand touched the wound, she gave a very small sound, and he pulled his hand back and saw the blood on it.

He said something to her — something about, My God, Anne, what the hell — and she opened her eyes and looked at him in a slow, considering kind of way, but with a certain blankness, as if she viewed him now from a new perspective, and another fly landed, and, more hesitantly, he brushed that one away, and still she did not speak at all.

"You have to go to the hospital," he told her. "You're bleeding; it's dangerous to bleed that way."

She ignored him by closing her eyes. Ants were walking over her bare feet. She didn't seem to feel them. "Anne" — loudly — "I'm calling an

ambulance. I'm calling the police, Anne."

The police were not helpful. He would have to press charges, they said, trespass charges against her, to have her removed. They became more interested when he started to explain, in vague, halting phrases, exactly how she was attached to his fence; and in sudden nervous fear, he hung up — perhaps they would think he had done it to her himself. Who knew what Anne might tell them? She was obviously crazy; to do that, she would have to be crazy. He looked out the kitchen window and saw her looking at the house, her eyes tracking as he moved slowly past the windows. He didn't know what to do. He sat in the living room and tried to think what to do.

By the time the sun went down, he still had no idea what course to take. He did not even want to go back outside, but he did, stood looking down at her. "Do you want some water? Or some aspirin or something?" And in the same breath, enraged by what he had just said, the extreme and dangerous stupidity of the whole situation, he shouted at her, called her a stupid fucking idiot, and walked back inside, shaking, shaking in his legs and knees and inside his body, feeling his heart pounding; it was hard to breathe. She had to be in pain. Was she so crazy she didn't even feel pain anymore? Maybe it was a temporary thing, temporary insanity; maybe a night spent outside would shock her out of it, a night sitting on the cold ground.

In the morning she was still there, although she had stopped bleeding. Ants walked up and down her legs. The blood at her wrists was messily clotted. The skin of her face was very white.

"Anne," he said, and shook his head. Her hair was damp, parts of it tangled in the fence, and the pulse in her throat beat so he could see it, a sluggish throb. He felt sorry for her; he hated her. He wanted her to just get up and go away. "Anne, please. You're not doing yourself any good. This is hurting you." And the look she gave him then was so pointed that he felt his skin flush; he refused to say anything; he turned and went back into the house.

Someone was knocking at his front door: the woman from next door, Barbara something, the paperboy's mother whose name he could not remember. She was shrill, demanding to know what he was going to do about that poor woman out there, and my God this and that, and he shouted at her from the depths of his confusion and anger, told her to get

the hell off his porch, and he had already been in contact with the police if that would satisfy her — thank you very much; it's none of your business to start with. When she was gone, he sat down; he felt very dizzy all of a sudden; he felt as if he had to sit down for a while, a good long while.

How, he didn't know, but he fell asleep, there in the chair, woke with his shirt collar sticking to his neck, sweat on his forehead and above his upper lip. He felt chilled. As he went into the kitchen to get something warm to drink, his gaze went to the windows. It was irresistible; he had to look.

She was still there, slumped back against the fence, a curve in her arms and back that curiously suggested tension. She saw him; he knew it by the way her body moved, just a little, as his cautious figure came into view. He ducked away, then felt embarrassed somehow, as if he had been caught peeping in a window, then angry at himself and, almost instantly, at her.

Let her sit, he said to himself. We'll see who gets tired of this first.

IT WAS almost ten days later that he called a doctor, a friend of his. Anne had not moved, he had barely gone near her, but even his cursory window inspections showed him things were changing; it was nothing he wanted to have to inspect. After much debate, he called Richard, told him there was a medical situation at his house; his evasiveness puzzled Richard, who said, "Look, if you have somebody sick there, you'd be better off getting her to a hospital. It is a her, isn't it?" Yes, he said. I just need you to come over here, he said. It's kind of a situation; you'll know what I mean when you see her.

Finally Richard arrived, and he directed him straight out to the backyard, stood watching from the window, drinking a glass of ice water. Richard was back in less than five minutes, his face red. He slammed the screen door hard behind him.

"I don't know what the hell's going on here," Richard said, "but I'll tell you one thing: that woman out there is in bad shape; I mean bad shape. She's got an infection that —"

Well, he said, you're a doctor, right?

"I'm a gynecologist." And Richard was shouting now. "She belongs in a hospital. This is criminal; this is a criminal situation. That woman could die from this."

He drank a little of his ice water, a slow swallow, and Richard leaned

forward and knocked the glass right out of his hand. "I said she could *die* from this, you asshole, and I'm also saying that if she does, it's your fault."

"My fault? My fault? How can it be my fault when she's the one who —" But Richard was already leaving, slamming back out the door, gone. The ice water lay in a glossy puddle on the chocolate-colored tile. He looked out the window. Her posture was unchanged.

It was a kind of dream, less nightmare than sensation of almost painful confusion, and he woke from it sweaty, scared a little, sat up to turn on the bedside lamp. It was almost three. He put on a pair of khaki jeans and walked barefoot into the backyard, the flashlight set on dim, a wavering oval of pale yellow light across the grass.

Perhaps she was asleep.

He leaned closer, not wanting to come too close, but wanting to see, and flicked the light at her face.

Moths were walking across her forehead.

Pale as her skin, a luminous promenade, and a small sound came from him as she opened her eyes. There was a moth beneath her right eyelid. It looked dead.

Her hair was braided into the fence, and the puffy circles of infection at her wrists spread, a gentle bloat extending almost to her elbows. There was a slightly viscous shine to the original wounds. The old blood there had a rusty tinge. The grass seemed greener now, lapping at her bare feet and ankles. When he touched her with the light, she seemed almost to feel it, for she turned her head, not away from the light as he expected, but into it, as if it were warm and she were cold.

No doubt she was cold. If he touched her now —

He flicked the light to full power, a small, brassy beam, played it up and down her body, nervously at first, then with more confidence as she moved so little, so gently in its light. Her hair looked dark as a vine. There was dew on her clothing. He stood looking at her for, it seemed to him, a very long time, but when he returned to the house, he saw it was barely quarter after three.

She kept on changing. The infection worsened and then apparently stabilized; at least it spread no further. Her arms, a landscape of green and pale brown leaves and the supple wood of the creeping growth about her breasts and waist, her clothing paler and more tattered, softly stained by

the days of exposure. Flowers were starting to sprout from behind her head, strange white flowers like some distorted stylized nimbus, our lady of the back forty. Her feet were a permanent green. It seemed her toenails were gone.

None of the neighbors would talk to him now. His attempts at explanations, bizarre even in his own ears, turned them colder still. Each day after work, he would look through the kitchen windows; each day he would find some new change, minute perhaps, but recognizable. It occurred to him that he was paying her more attention than ever now, and in a moment of higher anger, he threw a tarp over her, big and blue and plastic, left over from boating days. It smelled. He didn't care. She smelled, too, didn't she? He covered her entirely, to the tips of her green toes, left her there. He was no more than twenty steps away, when the rustling started, louder and louder, the whole tarp shaking as if by a growing wind; it was horrible to watch, horrible to listen to, and, angrier still, he snatched it away, looked down at her closed eyes and the spiderweb in her ear. As he stood there, her mouth opened very slowly; it seemed she would speak. He looked closer, and saw a large white flower growing in her mouth, its stem wound around her tongue, which moved, feebly, as she tried to talk.

He slapped her, once, very hard. It was disgusting to look at her. He wanted to smother her with the tarp; he was afraid to try it again. He couldn't bear that sound again, that terrible rustling sound like the rattling of cockroaches. God, if only there were some way to kill her fast, he would do it; he would do it right now.

The white flower wiggled. Another slowly unfurled like a time-lapse photo, bigger than the first. Its petals were a richer white, heavy like satin. It brushed against her lower lip, and her mouth hung slightly open to accommodate its weight; it looked like she was pouting, a parody of a pout.

He threw the tarp away. He pulled down the blinds in the kitchen and refused to check on her after work. He tried to think, again, what to do, lay in bed at night hoping something would somehow do it for him. After a particularly heavy rain, during which he sat up all night, almost chuckling in the stern sound of the downpour, he rushed out first thing in the morning to see how she'd liked her little bath. He found her feet had completely disappeared into the grass, her hair gone into vines with leaves the size of fists, her open mouth a garden. She was lush with growth. He

felt a sick and bitter disappointment, with childish spite wrenched one of the flowers from her mouth and ground it into the grass where her feet had been. Even as he stood there, the grass crept a discernible distance forward.

Grass, all of it growing too high around her. Well, when the grass gets too high, you cut it, right? That's what you do; you cut it — and he was laughing a little; it was simple. A simple idea, and he started up the mower. It took a few tries, but he started it. A left turn from the garage, walking past the driveway with a happy stride, pushing the mower before him, growling sound of the mower a comfort in his ears — and all at once the ground trembled; was it the mower's vibration? It trembled again, harder this time — no earthquakes here, what the hell — and it happened again, more strongly, over and over, until he stumbled beneath their force and lost his footing entirely, fell down and saw with a shout of fear that the mower was still on, was growling at him now, the waves of grass aiming it toward him. He rolled away, a clumsy scramble to stand again, half-crawled to the safety of the still driveway. As soon as his feet left the grass, the waves stopped. The mower's automatic cutoff shut it down. He was crying and couldn't help it.

"What do you want?" Screaming at her, tears on his lips. "What do you want?" Oh, this is the last straw; this is enough. No more.

Back to the garage, looking for the weed killer, the Ortho stuff he'd used before, herbicide; and the term struck him, and he laughed, a hard, barking laugh. He had trouble attaching the sprayer: the screw wouldn't catch, and he struggled with it, the hastily mixed solution, too strong, splashing on his skin, stinging where it splashed. Finally, in his heat, he threw the sprayer down — the hell with it; he would just pour it on her, pour it all over her.

Walking fast across the grass, before she could catch on, before she could start up, hurrying, and the solution jiggling and bubbling in the bottle: "Are you thirsty?" Too loudly. "Are you thirsty, Anne? Are you—" And he threw it at her, bottle and all, as hard as he could. And stepped back, breathing dryly through his mouth, to watch.

At first, nothing seemed to be happening; only her eyes, opening very wide, the eyes of someone surprised by great pain. Then, on each spot where the solution had struck, the foliage began not to writhe, but to blacken — not the color of death, but an eerily sumptuous shade — and

in one instant every flower in her mouth turned black, a fierce and luminous black; and her eyes were black, too, her lips, her hands black, as slowly she separated herself from the fence, dragging half of it with her, rising to a shambling crouch, and her tongue free and whipping like a snake as he turned, much too slowly; it was as if his disbelief impeded him, turning back to see in an instant's glance that black, black tongue come crawling across the grass, and she behind it with a smile.

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Robert Frazier lives on Nantucket Island with his wife and daughter. He is best known for his poetry (in F&SF and other magazines). He writes that this story emerges from one of the points of convergence in the American Consciousness. Everyone seems to remember exactly what they were doing when they heard the news from Dallas, in November 1963.

Mummers

By Robert Frazier

1.

TRACKING THE SCOPE along a painted stripe on the peak of the building below, Winwood mimes Oswald's moves with near perfection, because when he does, he thinks he sees — for a long moment — the back of the president's head in the cross hairs before he squeezes the trigger. He feels a chill that juices along his spine, feels his body fuse with the holographic time image that surrounds him. "Shit, yeah," he says along with the assassin's voice after the shots. He means it. He has nailed down another performance so tight that he can almost smell the old School Book Depository, and cool his skin in the breeze that once blew through the window. Then they herd the tourists out and in just one last time, their faces sweating beyond the filmy veil of the projection, and when Monday afternoon is finished, another dozen of the deed acted out, the technicians power the Temfield off. Circuits embedded behind the walls

and ceiling and floor whisper secrets as they cool; 1963 tatters, ghosts away. The theater hall smells like the musty museum that it is, and the tech boys close up shop as they discuss who they will be tonight, what famous persons they will imitate on their dates. They leave without so much as a nod of recognition to Winwood for *his* impersonation, his masterful fleshing out of the weak Temfield images.

Winwood must congratulate himself. His performances were good, especially that next-to-last show. It is as if he managed a change, as if he physically shunted from the Armageddon heat of this present November to that cooler November a lifetime ago. The pale translucence of Oswald more than just moved around him, setting the scene out of history; no, he moved within the figure, in synch, and brought true color and substance to the character's unfolding. He is excited by this breakthrough, yet the morbid nature of his job — acting and re-acting the key moment of an assassin — again weights his mood like cement.

Winwood scuffles up the aisle of the Depository Theater and out past the security monitors that dot the upper hallways of the museum. He decides not to change in the dressing room, and instead, he will return home to wash up and launder his costume. In the downstairs lobby, he stops by the model of another theater under glass, the movie house where Lee Harvey Oswald hid when on the run. The interior shows a simple world of tiny plastic figures glued to their seats. In contrast, most of the Dallas Museum of Assassination is crowded with holo-displays of weapons and gruesome murders from throughout history. He shakes his head with skepticism. There is a uniform ugliness to the decor, a mix of early NASA high tech with Torquemada and the Inquisition. He steps through the security guards at the front entrance with a practiced indifference, shrugs off the customary offer of a ride in the museum's armored shuttle bus. Walking forces him to keep fit. He wants the down-and-dirty boulevard today.

A parade of Elvises moves up Elm Street, and they beat drums and chant old rock music in choruses, while younger imitators — painted, not yet altered by surgery — work the edges with rhinestone-cruled cups, collecting money to support their lifelong devotions to the legend of the King. A local police squad covers the beat, moving slow in flak jackets and night-vision helmets. Uzis at their belts. A troupe of Our Gang kids, led by a spitting-image Spanky, ambushes them with paint guns. When the spat-

tering gets serious and a Marx Brothers troupe laughs in the cops' faces, one officer scatters the crowd by emptying his clip overhead. Oblivious, a Bogart-and-Bacall pair are making love against the red plastic fender of a mock Edsel. This is the true soul of the city. In an age when identity has been reduced to their citizen ID, their permanent number of the beast, they express their individuality this way while continuing to hide the true individual, steeping it in an iconography of the past.

Winwood feels more and more ambiguous about this mimicry. Outside of work, he and his lover, Britt Sallonen, dress up in the personas of the famous, yet he also tries to live moment to moment. He tries to forget the wide-eyed avidity and homogenized responses of the audience who come to see him do Oswald at the theater. Tries to forget the indifferent laugh of the museum curator. Forget the pall of mortality that sticks on all the Temfield workers like a slime mold. He shrugs and turns a busy corner toward his uptown apartment.

That is always the hardest part — the forgetting.

2.

BRITT HELPS him through it all. She strokes his eyes when the mimetic afterimages burn inside his head. If he can't hold down fast food, she conjures solid meals from his kitchen. When he feels a deeper emptiness, Britt coos Finnish-sounding vowels as she rubs her palms into his chest, winks a blue-green eye from within the curls of her jet-black bangs. And if the work eats into his gut more than usual that afternoon, if he can't exorcise the demons of memory that speed through his veins like a hundred-dollar poison, then Britt offers to go with him into a booth she calls the "mummer box," a small Temfield device he keeps in his apartment. She acts out the short loop he has preserved there of his lost lover, a woman he would have flashed and burned for, if she hadn't burned out first. This Monday is such a day.

"God, it's a pissar," Winwood says as he slumps into his favorite stuffed chair. His skull seems sodden and gray inside, a cartoon head with thoughtless smudges of ballooning over it. "I'm sweatin' rivers."

"Yeah." She hands him a can of beer beaded with condensation. "Must have been 105 inside the Motorcade Building. My eyes hurt under those stupid contacts. I keep telling Baines I need better ones."

"And he keeps pretendin' to ignore you."

"Yeah."

He has seen her once as Mrs. Kennedy, and she is good. Not another failed starlet with a bimbo voice and a cute set of warheads. No, she brings charisma to her role. As the convertible passed his seat in the audience that day, her poise radiated through the long booth that the Texas government built over the street where the shooting occurred. She was convincing. He knew then that he had to meet her, to feel that raw intensity oozing over him.

Now she stretches in her skimpy, zebra-patterned exercise leotard, and sweat glistens on the porcelain curves of her muscles. As she does a spinal twist, the hair is mussed into a thousand licorice curls. The lips look edible. Winwood just isn't hungry. Peeling his shirts off, he tosses them into the laundry basket in the corner with a grunt. He is still in his Oswald mode. He feels introspective and moody, abrupt in his mannerisms.

"You know what?" she asks.

"What?"

"There is one thing new in my costume. They've begun to make Jackie's raspberry suits out of polyester. Cheap plastics. They get my crotch itching."

"You aren't wearin' one now," he says.

That could be suggestive, but Winwood is merely factual. Maybe he is trying to work up an interest, maybe not. Britt ignores this reading and eases sidelong onto the armrest. She runs a painted fingernail through the hairs on his pectorals. She takes his beer and pushes his hand inside the low cut of her leotard down the side. His fingers slide across the rough of her nipples, the roseate velvet surrounding them. Her breath catches in her chest.

"I'm not wearing one, but I've still got the itch," she says in a throaty whisper.

She stands with the quick moves of a dancer and pulls his arm, spilling the beer off its perch on the armrest. He struggles, protesting weakly, but she grins and tugs harder. He lurches forward as she leads him to the wire-encrusted box he built with a tech friend and two years' wages. She swings open the hatch, pushes up the power switch, and crawls onto the bed inside, never letting free of him.

"I hope you paid the electric bill, Rosco."

Britt is the consummate performer. Outside the box, he is always Ross to Britt, but inside, she registers the formality of Rosco Winwood — like *she* had called him. His dead beauty. His ephemeral lover. Winwood pulls his jeans down over his ankles, flips them aside, and gets up on his knees, synching with a younger self in the projection. She wiggles out of her leotard into place on the bed as the temporal field strengthens. A faintly red-haired woman reaches for him. Flesh and image meld, and he is caught again in a memory.

"I'm lonely," Britt says, but it is no longer her voice.

He pulls her into a sitting position and strips off her underwear. She breaks from his grip to nip at his ear, makes bites on his neck that set his groin on fire. The bites grow painful. She manhandles him until he stiffens in reflex, then she pushes away and rolls onto her knees, back to him, arching the smooth globe of her ass before him into a perfect, divided sphere. A world lost but now regained.

"Take me, Rosco. Be forceful."

He enters her, as he did then, as he must always, and the thrill of it sends a shock wave through him. This is how it was. All that sweet friction. Even when he is down and depressed, he remembers this happiness and the woman he shared it with. But what of Britt? It is her musk he inhales. Her silken mysteries he penetrates from behind. Before, he succeeded in pushing these thoughts out of his mind, in moving with her like a dynamo of pure energy, but he can't now. Whether he is dressing in personas or not, he finds himself more engulfed by the past than by the present, and he isn't alone at it. The whole country lives in its glories gone by: in events like Gettysburg or the Roaring Twenties or the Kennedy Assassination. They retreat to their own mummer boxes. Thus, America languishes as a third-rate world power. Its citizens are in love with history, not with the reality of their lives. Something disturbs him about this.

He realizes he can't even recall the name of the red-haired woman that he had idolized. He knows this is Britt that shudders against him. Just Britt. He stops, and for a flash her projection is edged with golden light. She twists her head toward him with an inquiring look, *the projection twisting with her*, then Britt continues moving, slapping her moist folds against his nonexistent thrust. He pulls out of her, lies down next to her, and tries to understand what has just happened.

"Why'd you stop?" she asks as she collapses out of the projection onto her side. She fondles him, but he grows limp.

Winwood stares up at the images of two ghastly figures as they arch their spines toward climax. He wants to ask Britt if it bothers her, this thing about the past, about mimicry and history. He wants to point up and say, "Look at that; we're crazy to be in here doing this. We can't change things. We're just pretending they haven't changed." Something deep inside him wants to connect with her, to tell her about his fear of losing her, losing the real Britt, but the words won't come.

"Why'd you stop?"

"I don't know," he says.

He isn't stating the truth. She can tell.

"Christ, you've been a downer lately." She fumbles about for her clothes and crawls out the hatch.

"But. . ."

"But nothing." She flips off the switch. "You can't even accept a nice gesture."

Winwood remains still, looking at the bare circuitry above and listening to the Temfield electronics tick as they cool. He wants most of all to ask her how she had done that trick, how she had altered the projection as she moved within the time loop and looked back at him from on her knees. He wants to ask her how she achieved the impossible. The words won't come.

"But I can't help it," he says. No one is listening.

3.

WINWOOD AWAKENS to a bar of moonlight that falls across the sheets and cleaves his face. He has had trouble sleeping all night, and now finds himself alert. With a toss of the covers that won't disturb Britt, he slips his legs over the side of the bed and fishes his T-shirt out of a dark pile on the floor. He pulls it over his head as he stands, then walks past the bathroom into the center of the apartment. Without a fan, the living room is hotter than the bedroom, and the laundry hanging on tall racks leaves the air muggy. But he feels comfortable in his overstuffed chair, and flips on a light. He rummages through the dusty stacks of holo-vid tapes beside him. Very few

look interesting, though a red case catches his eye. The old training tape from work, the one Curator Baines issued him. He plugs it in and sits back as the holocube flickers to life inside. An FBI warning flares up in fat letters, followed by a blurb from the Texas government. Then a message from the Museum of Assassination — Baines in a dull voice-over — stating that resale of the tape is prohibited. Baines starts it with an introduction.

"You coming back to bed, Ross?"

"Can't sleep," he says, without taking his eyes from the glass cube.

"Yeah. A lot of things you can't do."

There is a long silence.

"You know, sometimes I think you're getting like him." She points at the projection. "Pretending to ignore me when you know exactly what I'm saying."

"What *are* you saying, dear?"

She slams the bedroom door. He hears the click and hum of the composting toilet in the bathroom.

Later, when he awakens in the chair, and the tape continues its endless loop through the cube, his muscles act stiff. He stands in the shower for a full allotment of one minute, then dries off in the bedroom. Britt has left for work early, taking what she owns from the apartment. Her clothes. Her cosmetics. Every damned little thing she owns.

4.

WINWOOD'S TIMING suffers during the Tuesday-morning sessions and Baines drops by the dressing room to ask if he feels O.K. He fabricates a story about having had the flu that weekend, and Baines calls for the understudy. He wants Winwood fresh for the next day. Several bigwigs are in the audience, he explains, because it is the fiftieth anniversary of the shooting. As curator, he is determined that things run without a hitch. Baines tells him to rest in bed. He acts like a concerned parent.

Instead of going home, though, Winwood visits the building where Britt works. By chance, or by an intent he had not explored at a conscious level, he gets escorted inside with the hushed crowd. The peacock-blue Lincoln drives in through the outside doors of the building as the time

field reaches full strength, and the audience finds itself on the bare triangle formed by Main, Houston, and, of course, Elm streets.

Again Winwood watches Jackie; her acknowledgment to the now-ghostly onlookers, the turn of her head, the radiant smile. He imagines Britt beneath the skin of the projection, centered on her role, moving with this flow of images sucked out of time. Then the first rifle report echoes across Dealey Plaza. A miss, though Connolly seems to react. The second report, and Kennedy reaches around the knot in his tie. A third, very loud, and the president rocks back against Jackie's shoulder, his brain matter smeared across the convertible's dark lacquer and the back right of the trunk. Jackie scrambles for it in a moment that never ceases to amaze Winwood. He seems light inside, his body without substance like a temporal projection. He has witnessed this scene from many angles. Even — he imagines — from the Depository window above. He knows accepted history, and the view favored over many alternate theories dismissed decades ago. Still, the brain matter should have blown forward, not backward, by the force of a rear shot by Oswald.

The rest happens quickly. Then the Lincoln exits where the other end of the building must be. The show ends as the field switches off.

Winwood needs time to study this further. He forgets to visit Britt in her dressing room after the show. He steps outside the Motorcade Building and hails a slow, battery-powered cab as it glides by. During the ride home, his thoughts jump about like static on a radio dial.

At home, Winwood sits with a beer before the holo-vid he watched early that morning. He is intent on the scenario. Noting details over and over. The first scenes show footage 3-D-enhanced from the original Zapruder eight-millimeter sequence: JFK waving as the car slips behind a sign; beginning to grip his throat as the car emerges in view; slumping against Jackie; the impact of the second bullet in the head. These are repeated as a reenactment, along with camera shots taken through the scope mounted with Oswald's carbine on a tripod. None of this warrants a resale ban on the tape until he reaches the time clips, the compressed holographic footage of the actual events captured by special Temfield cameras. Here the scope of the film is restricted by the sizes of the temporal fields: the enclosed stretch of Elm Street where the motorcade passed through at 12:30 that day, and also the minitheater where he works at the corner window area of the sixth floor of the old Book Depository. The

scenes are very pale without actors fleshing out their moves, but events are visible and unique to the Temfield process. He knows the book-room sequences inside and out. Oswald fidgets from his position down behind the barricade of boxes. Rests his elbow. Sights the gun out the window. Leans forward, squinting to watch the car through the oak leaves below. Oswald squeezes off three shots.

Last on the recording comes Ruby shooting Oswald. Winwood has this memorized as well. He supplements his income by working two Saturdays a month enacting Oswald in an enclosure over the auto ramps in the basement of the old Dallas police station. He finds it an ugly role. Dying isn't his idea of fun on the job.

Baines has an afterword, so Winwood rewinds to the holographic footage. Not Oswald's death or the book-room sequence, but the classic footage of the motorcade. He counts the shots. Listens to their separate tones. Watches how the president reacts. How Mrs. Connolly pulls her husband down and when. He rewinds and rewinds. Cutting seconds into hundredths with the LED counter on his state-of-the-art player. Then into thousandths. He dials up Britt when he thinks she is back home at her apartment.

"Hi, kid. Why don't you come over for dinner. Got somethin' I want to show you."

Her eyes are narrowed; she acts wary. She steps closer to her transmission screen, and he sees she is dressed for a party, tastefully made up to be a young Marilyn Monroe. She asks what he wants to show her.

"Somethin' in the tapes."

She wants to know what tapes.

"Our trainin' tapes. Look, I've been bothered by what's in them. By what I have to do each day. I guess it's been affectin' me at home."

She reminds him that she has also been bothered. Her work is stressful as well. What about her?

"What do you mean?" he says. It is a white lie. He knows what.

She yells about an apology. He isn't making one. Winwood selfishly thinks about what bothers Winwood, she rails. Not about her.

"Sorry."

It is too late. She logs off. The screen holds her image for a few seconds of decay. Marilyn, Jackie's alter ego.

He starts the assassination tape running through the cube again. The sequence of inevitable events casts his predicament in a different light.

Perhaps he is just acting out history with Britt as well. Superdeterminism. Fritjof Capra's scientific name for Fate. Everything must happen as it will happen. All differences between the observer and what is observed, between the events and the participants, are arbitrary. Without meaning, Kennedy couldn't have avoided assassination or, say, the earlier debacle erupting in Vietnam; Winwood can't avoid the decline in his relationship with Britt. He has to say what he does. She must react as she does. True fates like his and hers. All a part of particle physics.

Thus, he is frozen into a single tunnel of events, the only tunnel, and that is why such things as time travel seem impossible. Yet the Temfield circuits are still capable of capturing the image of time, since no deviations can distort things. At least, that is the accepted explanation. He can't quite get it straight in his head, though. Time passes before him and is gone, but he can see into the past through the Temfield, right? No deviations? Inflexible oneness? Yet sometimes, like with Britt on the bed in his booth, the field seems malleable as well.

This dilemma overwhelms Winwood. The temporal phenomena are real, but the rest can't be true. Quantum mechanics, maybe, but not superdeterminism. Not terrible events like Vietnam. Not a breakup with Britt.

Winwood crawls into the booth in the corner and turns on the projection. He watches the wispy image of his younger self as he penetrates the red-headed woman. Sees the rapt expression on his face as he grips her and holds tight for a moment. Senses the passion that surges through her. Yet there is no interruption this time, no stoppage by either character. Not like last night. He crawls back out and goes straight to the vidphone.

"Britt? Look, I just want to find out how you —"

"How I what? How I figure another way to get the message through to you. Read my lips. N-O. Buzz off. I'm not interested in coming over. Don't call me; I'll call you!"

She is heading out the door, and she cuts him off again. He should have known that she would. There is a gap that widens between them. He feels her slipping away from him, like other women have in the past. Acids churn through his stomach. His heart flip-flops. Can he help it? Can he reverse their decline? He begins to have doubts. It is in the cards, sucker. Plain physics.

* * *

5.

ADANK, FOGGY morning. No breeze. Dawn of another hothouse day on a hothouse world where all humanity is homogenized into a single culture. Winwood raises himself from a fitful sleep and dresses very early for work in his clean, pressed Lee Oswald outfit. He feels a part of the whole.

He walks the streets between his apartment and the museum without any firm intentions. He is just walking. A pack of Hell's Angels personas ride by on chopped Harleys, their solar-charged electrical systems pushed to the limit while the antique sounds of gas engines issue from speakers on their saddlebags. A combine-sized trash eater cruises behind them, its solar panel deployed, its suction vents gobbling litter and garbage as a man whoops and shakes his hat from the driver's seat on top. The huge suction hose narrowly avoids a drunken bum sleeping under flattened boxes, then two cops lift him into an armored squad car. The sweeper turns down an alley before a food stand with a blue weather canopy. Winwood buys a hot tart from the vendor with beefcake arms and a revolver tucked into his apron waist. The drunks are getting rebellious and violent, he explains, even those who can afford personas. Same with the Flower Children gangs. Even the Gandhis on the corner. Winwood commiserates, then pays for his breakfast. The insides of his pastry taste like glue, and he wonders if there isn't a universal explanation to the atmosphere of disquiet that seems afoot.

Crossing several arteries, he finds himself at Dealey Square, as if all roads in his life lead there. It is in the cards. This is the day he will do it. It is in the cards.

That must be what Oswald thought in 1963. Gathering the rifle from the garage where Marina and Ruth lived in the suburbs. Eating dinner there and talking of moving them to Dallas. And all the time he thought about the deed to be done. Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow is the day. Sleeping in fits and starts. Tomorrow is the day. Getting up early and leaving all his cash on the dresser. Getting back into town with the rifle wrapped in heavy paper, saying he carried a package of curtain rods to anyone that asked. Getting to work. Getting things arranged on the sixth floor. All the while thinking. Today is the day. Today is the day. Well, today is Winwood's day. He is going to fight his private apathy and make something happen. And put his

will . . . his soul into it. Today is his day to be a rebel.

Winwood lets himself into the museum, at the main desk greets the guard who is always dressed in filmy Bessie Smith dresses and feathered hairpieces. The guard inquires about his premature arrival. Winwood tells her that he will be on the sixth floor, in the book room and in plain view of the security cameras. He wants to get some practice in for the big day. The guard nods. She is aware of the anniversary. He hears her making a call as he leaves the lobby, so he isn't surprised to find Curator Baines cued on the 2-D monitor screen in the hallway upstairs, just where the floor rises in a ramp to the theater door. Baines is playing it serious today, with an obvious Godfather suit and a stern face made to resemble Brando. *Don't mess with me, his manner warns.*

"Up early, Winwood?"

"Sure. I felt rusty and thought I'd practice."

Baines nods, gives a coy raise to one eyebrow. "You could have given us advance warning. This is irregular."

"I couldn't sleep." Winwood shrugs. That, at least, is true. "So I thought I'd get ready early."

"How?"

"Just sit in by the window and meditate. Heft the Mannlicher, maybe. I want to be good today."

This makes Baines laugh, but his mouth freezes into a rictus. Big Brother passes judgment on Winwood.

"A technician in the Motorcade Building reported that Britt Sallonen said you've been acting strange lately. Also, you were one of the visitors there yesterday, when I'd given you leave to go home and rest. These are more irregularities."

"Like I said, I've been feelin' rusty."

"What exactly does 'rusty' mean?"

"Like I need a refresher on the basics." Winwood senses a way out. "In fact, if you could get a couple of the techies to fire up for a real practice session, that would be great. I know it's an extra cost to the taxpayers, but today's important. . . ."

Winwood watches the expression change on Baines's face. Baines sees it the same way. He will prefer to expend more money and manpower, make it look like his idea, rather than report that his star Temfield actor is getting flaky. Might reflect on his position, on his ability to control his workers.

"My thoughts exactly. They're already on the way. And good luck. I'll be in the audience. There'll also be several people in control of our funding."

The frozen, predatory smile returns before Baines vanishes into a dot on the screen. Winwood passes a silver card along a vertical slot in the jamb at the entrance, unlocking the doors, and switches on the lights to the room. He sits in the back row and surveys the theater like a general sizing up a battleground.

When the Texas government requisitioned the Depository as a monument and display space, the old plaster walls and low ceiling of the sixth floor were gutted, and the roof raised in order to make walk-down aisles through a sharply sloping, half-round splay of seats. The infamous section of wall in the southeast corner of the building, where pipes came through the scuffed hardwood floor, remained untouched in a pit at the bottom of the space. The old, low-set windows were left grimy, but to the sides, the walls are cleaned, modernized, with speakers tucked into the corners.

When the Temfield circuits kick on, and the temporal field is stable, the images of the boxes Oswald stacked to hide himself are reinforced by real ones. Thus, the first row is raised high enough to see over these. Also, the top rows of seats stop where a clean view into the pit becomes obscured by that section of the old sixth-floor ceiling preserved inside the Temfield. This all limits the seating, but the public pays well for such limitations. They pack the house to see Winwood.

Winwood hears someone banging about the control booth at the back. He is losing track of time. He starts down the middle aisle.

"We're already in. You about set for a loop, Ross?" The voice crackles over a two-way speaker.

"Almost."

Winwood descends the last step and hops down into the pit. He unlocks the rifle case built under the first row of seats. The ancient carbine feels reassuring in his hands. He loads the blanks. Opens the window to the marks painted in the frame. He checks the alignment of the scope against a small chart he keeps stapled to the back wall, then sits on a box while resting the rifle along another.

"Let's skip the waitin' period. I want the three shots."

Static, then: "In sequence or isolated one at a time?"

"In sequence."

The loop kicks in a minute before the shots, and Winwood shrugs his muscles to relax, gets into synch. He sights the scope on the roof of the Motorcade Building outside. He squeezes off three shots, concentrates on his hand action on the bolt with each. During the second loop, though, he is in time with the bolt. Next he focuses through the scope. Refusing to believe in the shingled roof he sees, he looks for the car. Toward the end of a two-hour session of reruns, he imagines the street, the tall trees, pigeons lifting from the buildings, the motorcade crawling along the street lined with onlookers, swarms of uniformed police on the pavement. The loops become a blur. He hardly notices his first audience of the morning. Today is his day.

"Gentlemen, I give you Ross Winwood."

It is Baines introducing him. He is vaguely aware that Britt isn't sitting out there, though Baines no doubt pressured her to attend. Winwood nods briefly aside to the front row of coats and ties, notes several costumed as presidents, including a President Johnson. On cue, he leans into position for the beginning of the full loop. He moves as if in a dream. There is no effort in the waiting sequence; he feels as nervous as Oswald was back then. He paces and ducks from sight in front of the window. He bristles with tension. At last he sits on the box. Rests the gun up on the one by the window. Takes a peek and sees the president's car through the tree branches below. Sees it. Knows his movements are in perfect alignment with the Temfield images that surround him. Knows the bullets in his gun are solid.

6A.

THE MOTORCADE clears the last limbs. The scope homes in. But he is tracking the carbine away, his arms feeling slow and restrained as if he were moving underwater. The effort hurts his muscles, but it works. The gun inches down before it goes off. The president still absorbs the projectile, but he reacts differently. Collapses forward and out of view. The images begin to glow with a cottony halo, and Winwood gets the light-headed feeling he often experiences on a drunk. It is like with Britt in the booth the other night, when the Temfield loop somehow, preposterously, paused during their sex. The moment is compressed, ready to unfold anew. It feels heavy with possibility. Then the

moment expands. There seem to be more shots, but Kennedy escapes them. The car speeds forward and heads away from the scene.

Winwood watches the images snake by, building a flowing scene, a timestream that he can step into and join if he chooses. He is certain of that.

The moments build and accelerate. Next, weeks, then months, zip ahead of him and streak down a tunnel that narrows to a point. Winwood senses more than he sees these changes. They don't flash before him, but bloom in his head, or his imagination. There is a weakening of the administration while Kennedy recovers. Many poor decisions among his advisers. The war expands from Vietnam like a brushfire, licking through the jungles, sending refugees fleeing before it. The situation goes sour.

Winwood lets himself snap back. He knows he will return to the Depository Theater if he doesn't step into the timestream, doesn't become a part himself. Flesh and blood must exist in some temporal fashion. He rushes backward out of this tunnel of vision.

6B.

THE MOTORCADE clears the tree limbs. The scope homes in. But he is tracking the gun away, his arms moving as if he were swimming underwater. The effort strains his arms, but it works. He increases his efforts. This time the gun jerks away before it goes off. The projectile enters the trunk of the limo, and the driver speeds forward instantly. There is confusion, and a different source to the second gunshot. Perhaps a policeman thinking one of the converging crowd is the assassin. The shot creases Kennedy in the shoulder. Kennedy doesn't collapse forward, but pulls Jackie down into hiding. The images begin to glow with a cottony halo. The moment expands. There seem to be more shots, but Kennedy escapes them. The car speeds forward and heads away from the scene.

The scenes snake by Winwood, building a picture, another timestream that he can step into if he chooses. He knows this with certainty. The moments build and accelerate. Next, months zip ahead of him, streaking down a tunnel that narrows to a point. His head fills with color, and impressions of scent and touch.

Kennedy recovers in days, and appears inspired to make sweeping

changes in foreign policy. He slows down participation in the Asian war. He makes strides for equality; though, at the same time, it is a gray, monotonous equality that Winwood witnesses.

This future looks like an interesting possibility to visit, but Winwood sees his own time as too close an analogue to this one. He might as well let go and return home. No, he still wants a vastly improved world. A place where he and Britt can forge a bright future on trust and love, and develop their talents in a real theater of acting. He lets himself go. Slips back again in a rush.

6C.

THIS TIME he slips farther back into the museum reality before he makes another stab at a timeline. He feels swamped in tension. He paces, sits on the box. Rests the gun up on the one side by the window. Rests his stabilizing elbow on the ones stacked to the side. Takes a peek and sees the president's car below. Sees it. Knows his movements are in perfect alignment with the images that surround him in the theater.

The motorcade clears the tree limbs. The scope homes in. But he is tracking the gun away, his arms moving as if he were swimming underwater. The effort strains his arms. The gun tracks. But not on Kennedy. Winwood shifts his body and deviates sharply from his act. Faint and distant, he hears an intake of breath, of Baines aghast from his seat in the theater, but Winwood blocks it out. Blocks that world out for good. He twists his body further and tracks the scope onto what history called the grassy knoll. He can't move back into or inside Oswald's thoughts, but this seems right. His study of the tapes plus his experience in the alternate timelines indicate a conspirator, and instinct, perhaps linked with Oswald in a mysterious fashion, moves his arms. And there is his man, the man who must have fired the head shot in the original incident. His top half is visible in the scope. Dressed as a policeman, no hat, a handgun with a scope resting on the top of a picket fence at the back where the grass is high. Winwood's first shot misses; that much is true to Oswald's history. Winwood's second nicks the gunman in the shoulder. He puts a third eye in the man's forehead, but not before the man fires the handgun, simultaneously echoing with — and covering over — his own shot; this also is

true to history. Winwood tracks back to the convertible. The images begin to glow with a cottony halo, a light-headed feeling that Winwood gets on a drunk. It is like with Britt in the booth the other night, when the Temfield loop somehow, impossibly, paused during their sex.

Then the moment expands.

Kennedy is cradling Jackie. Her dress is, of course, spattered with blood. But now it's her blood.

Winwood sights down the scope to determine what's happened. The scope zooms in, and he's falling down an endless tunnel of possibility. Jackie dies. An abrupt peace in Vietnam. Major strikes in human affairs. And he is slipping into this new timeline without brakes, without sensing its changes first. He can't stop himself. He keeps falling. Mentally, he knows this is the better future he'd hoped for, but he finds himself struggling against it, trying to maintain a thread of connection. He may want to bail out. He *wants* to bail out. There's something wrong. A cold emptiness pervades him, but at last he feels himself spinning back to the theater.

He knows he can't safely try another time jaunt.

He feels, somehow, relieved.

7.

THE THEATER crowd acts as if nothing happened, and, indeed, Winwood is sure that nothing external has. After he shakes hands with several dignitaries and basks in the glow of Baines's self-pride, Winwood excuses himself and wanders down the street toward Hiller's Bar. He is upset. He held a chance, perhaps, to change history. Not only the grim details of the assassination, but the grim reality of his failures with Britt. But he passed that opportunity by. And gladly. Not just because he is scared of how different the differences might be—and he is scared. Not just because of the uncertainty involved.

He wants it to be a personal change. Escaping to another future is just escaping. It isn't coping with his problems.

Winwood finds himself standing in front of a vidphone, his face reflected in the screen. To hell with it, he thinks. To hell with superdeterminism and acting like everyone is supposed to act, like he once did when he thought he was incapable of acting any other way. To hell with

mimicking other people's behavior. He is tired of other people's reality. He wants a bold move to come from within him. He doesn't know what will go down with Britt, if they will crash and burn again, or draw closer together than ever before, in any timeline. He is not sure that it matters one way or the other, either. He just feels it is *possible* to do better. That it is worth trying for. That he isn't just acting out an irreversible scenario.

He decides to commit this time. To find Britt and make a stab at being truthful and sincere.

He reaches for the keypad on the phone.

"Hi, Ross," is all she says when she answers at the other end. There's a faint smile. But it seems to say much, much more.



"Welcome and may I say I'm pleased to meet the man who gave the world linguini with pesto sauce!"

Michael Lee is a full time free lancer whose work has appeared in a variety of newspapers and magazines. He lives on Cape Cod, where he writes a weekly humor column for the Cape Cod Newspaper Group. His first F&SF story concerns a remarkable and disquieting houseguest.

Stranger in the Green Chair

By Michael Lee

WHEN I CAME home from work that evening, there was a stranger sitting in the green chair in the living room. I'd never seen him before, but his features were so common as to be striking — a contradiction, I know, but it seemed at the time remarkable. He had the kind of features that would defy an intricate description.

I noticed him immediately because he was sitting in that green chair no one sits in. The chair was a gift from my wife's uncle, a wealthy and acerbic old fart, who insisted it was a piece the room could be furnished around. I always thought it was his metaphor for being the individual around whom the world should form. The first time he met me, just prior to our wedding, he snorted derisively in my direction. How do you do?

The stranger didn't move to get up, but acknowledged me by a slight acquiescent nod. I looked around the livingroom for my wife, or traces of her — a purse or car keys or the day's mail, anything to signal her presence — and seeing none, I felt an uneasy stir.

This was relieved immediately by her breezing entrance from the kitchen, wiping her hands on the side of her jeans and then extending them toward me in a welcoming embrace.

"There you are," she said, "right on time."

She kissed me lightly on the cheek. It was this gesture, this innocuous little peck she gives me as hello, that first made me fall in love with her.

Susan and I were students at Amherst and fervent supporters of the standard revolutionary causes middle-class kids specialize in. We were amateur socialists, very bad poets, pseudo jazz heads, and bosh artists who didn't know Ramses III from Ramsey Lewis. We met in a civil rights march on campus, and at the end of the march, our sociotragic espousals put to bed for the night, I asked her out for a beer. She said yes, thanked me, and kissed me on the cheek. I fell in love.

Our houseguest — and now he was a guest because the peck on the cheek set the matter straight — rose and took a step toward us.

"Darling," Susan said, "I'd like you to meet John Charon. John, this is my husband, Bill."

He extended his hand to me, and we gripped with a businessman's pressure, not testing each other, but the grip was sure and enthusiastic. "Mr. Gray, my pleasure," he said.

"Oh, make it Bill, please," I said, pumping his hand in return.

"Thank you, Bill. You have a wonderful home here and a gracious hostess." Charon finished this last with an almost formal flourish toward Susan.

"Bill," Susan said, "I've asked John to stay for dinner."

"Again, Susan," he said, "I don't want to put you to any trouble. . . ."

"Nonsense," she waved. "My cooking is trouble only for those forced to eat it for any length of time."

John Charon smiled. "I'm sure you're a wonderful cook," he said.

"You'd be wrong," I piped in, and Susan laughed heartily. Her cooking prowess was a standard joke among our friends for its abysmal nature. Neither Susan nor I particularly cared for food, so it didn't matter. We rarely ate out, and three nights out of the week, didn't formally dine at all. Usually we'd pick at vegetables or fruit, and rarely at the dining table. It drove our friends mad, since cooking and food seemed to be the focal point for much of their social lives.

Secretly, I always felt they were envious of our disdain for organized

food orgies, and maybe a few coveted our trim features. We were all in our mid- to late thirties now, some closer to forty than they could believe, and the years were spreading to several waistlines and thighs. Susan and I took care of ourselves by default. Our blasé attitude toward rich food and enthusiasm for active sports kept us in shape by default.

Susan went off to the kitchen to rescue something from the microwave. "Well, John," I said, then paused because I didn't know what to say next. "Well. How about a drink?"

"If you're having one, Bill."

"Ah yes, of course. What's your pleasure?"

"Oh, anything, really. I'm easy to please at the liquor cabinet. Just a little whiskey, perhaps?"

I smiled at him. He was a pleasant sort, his features easy and relaxed. His eyes, calm and fixed, carried no threat, and his straight nose gave no hint of ethnicity.

"Coming right up," I said, and headed for the kitchen.

Susan was worrying over a steaming bowl of brussels sprouts, turning them over and over, sprinkling some kind of dry packaged mix into them. She smiled at me, but gave no hint of anything pending except another forgettable dinner.

"Well," I began, hoping she'd fill in the implied blanks.

"Well?" she asked.

"Who is he?"

"John Charon," she said, dumping the sprouts into a larger bowl, this one filled with pasta.

"I know that, Susan. We met, remember? But *who* is he?"

"What did you do, leave him out there? Darling, you're being rude."

"No, I'm not. I'm in here getting drinks," I said, heading for the bottle of Seagram's we'd had for two years. "Now, who is John Charon?"

She tittered as she turned the sprouted glop over in the bowl and started shaking parmesan cheese into its steamy mass.

"What's funny?" I asked her.

"Just the way you said, 'Who is John Charon?' Remember when we used to meet at Serena's bar on Washington Street, and you'd come up to me and say, so seriously, 'Who is John Galt?'"

"I remember. But I found out who John Galt was. Now I'm interested in John Charon."

She began shooing me out of the kitchen as though we were part of a Norman Rockwell. "Deliver the drinks, make a little small talk, and then excuse yourself to help me serve. I'll explain everything then. It's quite simple."

John Charon actually looked comfortable in that green chair. His legs easily crossed, a casual air exuded from him, and he looked up pleasantly as I handed him the whiskey and ice.

"Little water, perhaps, John?" I asked.

"I'll tough it out if you do, Bill," he said to me as though we had just played the back nine at Pleasant Valley.

"So what do you do for a living?" he asked me.

"Well, it's a little hard to explain, John. I'm sort of an administrative man for one of those big shoe manufacturers outside the city." What was I saying to this man? What I did was not hard to explain at all. I was a professional paper pusher. A reasonably well paid cog in a profitably grinding, boring machine.

He smiled at me. "We probably have similar duties. I work with one of the so-called Big Three insurance companies. Odds are we handle your company's policies."

"Oh really?" I said. "Which company do you work for, John?"

Charon laughed softly, a self-derisive chortle. "Does it matter?" he said. "They're all the same: same suits, same ties, pale blue shirts, and digital watches. We're patternists, Bill; we're all alike with different faces."

"Don't forget the wing-tipped shoes. It pays the rent around here."

We both laughed at this inane remark of mine as though Bob Hope had delivered the line. Then Susan called out for me to help serve.

"Take a seat in the dining room, John. The miracles of electricity and microwave heat are about to be illustrated. We'll be right with you."

Susan was fretting over a bottle of Valpolicella. "Open this, will you?" she said.

"May I help?" John asked from the kitchen door, his head peering around. His voice startled us, and I jumped perceptibly. He couldn't help notice.

"Sorry if I surprised you, Bill. I just felt out of place being waited on, and wanted to help if I could."

It was a strange moment then, with the three of us in the kitchen. It felt as though John had caught Susan and me in an intimate moment, that

he had entered a sanctum of the house that, while not forbidden, was peculiarly off-limits. We all felt, in those scant seconds, a violation had been committed, and we were perplexed at our mutual embarrassment. The feeling hung in the air over us like a long sigh, and then dissipated quickly as a bubble would burst and, with its residue, wash the staleness from the air.

The three of us began to snigger, guardedly at first, then, as Susan became louder, John kicked in with a heartier laugh, and I laughed harder than the two of them, which made them both laugh all the more.

John wiped tears from his eyes and managed to choke out, "What are we laughing at?"

This got us all again like we were teenagers in church, and I thought to myself, This must be how the carburetor in our Pontiac feels after we let it out at seventy for a while. It seemed I hadn't laughed like that in a long time.

We managed to get everything on the table, and John uncorked the wine with a flourish. It seemed we were quite delighted with each other's company, but no one knew why.

Susan, perkier than I'd seen since Ferraro's candidacy, finally began explaining the situation to me.

"Do you remember a conversation we had a couple of weeks ago just after you got back from the health club?" she asked.

"I need more of a hint," I told her.

"Well, you had played racquetball with Walter and came home complaining about the sameness of everything. Walter always beats you at racquetball, you said; it never changes. Walter brays about it in the locker room. Then Ted Madison comes by and tries to give you a bogus stock tip. 'On and on it goes,' you said. You don't remember that?"

Actually, I remembered it well. It was something that had been bothering me much longer than the frequency of my complaints to Susan indicated. My life had assumed such a methodical invariability to it that I could no longer distinguish Monday from Wednesday, Tuesday from Friday. I knew I wasn't the first man to drop down from the trees and endure this, but, Jesus, what suffering.

I tried doing things differently, as if that would change the outcome of my inevitabilities. I started using my left hand for daily tasks instead of the natural comfort of my right. Handling a fork, turning a screwdriver,

dialing a phone — I forced my left hand to action.

I drove to the office using different routes, making it a challenge to arrive on time. I started listening to country-and-western music, songs like, "Tow Trucking Mama" and "There's No Ugly Woman After Last Call." At almost every new turn, though, I was reminded of my desperation simply by the originality of the act. It would be a flag-waving, four-alarm memorandum: I was yesterday's newspaper, last week's flowers. I gave up on it, let myself breathe out a long, raspy sigh and get on with my life. It was not the easiest thing for me to do, but the simplest.

It's not as though all this life by rote had accomplished nothing. Susan and I have a nice home and a steady, reliable income. Our friends are nice, our . . . shit . . . everything's nice. You could choke on nice.

"Oh Bill?" Susan had been saying. "Bill? Back from Mars?"

"Sorry," I said. "Just transfixed by this grand feast before us."

"Lying, even packaged as flattery, is a bad habit," Susan laughed.

"Well, I don't know what everyone is talking about," John piped in. "It looks great to me."

"What *were* we talking about?" I asked.

Susan passed John the bowl and smiled as he took two heaping portions and piled them on his plate. The steam snaked and twisted upward and fanned out as it collided with the Italian swirls on the ceiling. Susan had insisted on these swirls, holding firm in the midst of the plasterer's whines. He told her it was old-fashioned. She told him it reminded her of her parents' dining room, and what was wrong with old-fashioned?

So many silly little things about us, and I seem to remember them to the most minuscule. It was an intimacy that relaxed me, like a doting relative assembling the family tree.

Susan heaped her own plate generously. "I was trying to remind you about your speech on monotony and the predictability of our lives," she said to me.

She passed me the dish, and, not to be outdone, I spooned out a considerable portion. "Oh yeah, I do remember that," I said. "Ever feel that way, John?"

I caught him with a long, milky noodle hanging out of his mouth. He swooped it in like he'd been eating with us all his life.

"Sure, I've felt that, Bill. It's pretty much why I'm here, I think," he said, glancing at Susan.

"I met John in the frozen-food section at Quik-Shop," Susan said, chewing away. I could see the pulpy gnash of pasta as she opened her mouth to talk. "He was over by the baby peas, and I was at the Tater Tots. Anyway, my taters slipped out of my hand and hit the floor. God, what a mess, these little frozen potato balls everywhere. And John, John came out with a quick line that I thought was funny. It reminded me of you, darling. He said, 'Another Irish Rorschach rears its ugly head.'"

I smiled appreciatively. "It was a quick line, not a good line," John said.

Susan waved her hand in the air. "Well, anyway, it did so remind me of you that I felt comfortable having a conversation with John, and after we talked a bit, I thought how much you'd like him. It all relates to what you were saying, Bill: the same people, the same conversations . . . so I asked John over for dinner this week."

"A new friend?" I asked.

"Bill, there's nothing fishy going on here," John said, "I find myself quite in the same position as you, frankly. Though I'm not married — pretty recently divorced, actually — there has been a noticeable stagnation to everything. I'm not a bar person, though I surely don't mind the odd highball, and Susan seemed so sincere about having me meet you. I hope you don't mind. I know this is a little unconventional."

"It's a little unconventional for all of us," Susan said.

"Look," John said, "you're wonderful people, and the last thing I want to do, or be, is a problem."

I guess it was my turn to speak, since they were both looking at me. The truth is, I felt a rapport with John, although the circumstances of our meeting, now that they had been explained, still gave me pause. This was, after all, my wife going around striking up a conversation with a stranger and then inviting him over to the house. But Susan had always demonstrated a flair for the exotic and was unafraid of a step to the left or right when everyone else plodded forward.

She had become, by this whimsical behavior, the one wedge of spontaneity in my life. It seemed vaguely dangerous and exciting. There was no doubt that in the context of the sludge of our lives, this was a plucky move, and ultimately, it occurred to me, an affectionate show of concern.

"John, you're welcome here," I said simply, and meant it.

The dinner passed as though old friends had sat together to catch up on time. John and I found two mutual priorities: nineteenth-century

French realism and the Boston Red Sox. Susan fell behind somewhat, knowing only the major hitters in each category. She contented herself with listening and throwing in the odd comment. Her most succinct of the evening was, "If Jim Rice were a real team player, he'd have quit baseball and gone on the pro golf tour a year ago."

As John finished a practiced but intriguing monologue on the works of Gustave Courbet, he glanced at his watch. "Good Lord, it's after midnight!" he said, jumping up.

He shook Susan's hand first. "Susan, don't believe your own press about your cooking. Dinner was marvelous."

He turned to me and stuck out his hand. My right hand fit into it like a glove, and I was truly sorry to see him leave.

"John" I said, "this has been a real pleasure. I hope it gets regular."

He smiled warmly. "You know, Bill, if someone had told me this was all going to happen, I would have been highly skeptical. But you've both made it easy and delightful. I hope you'll allow me to reciprocate with a nice restaurant."

"Done," I said. "Call us soon."

"You can count on it. Thank you all very much."

We watched John leave, and then turned to each other.

"Are you angry, darling? I mean, really?" Susan asked.

"No," I said. "He's too nice a fellow. But I do wish you'd be a bit less impetuous."

"Do you really?"

"No," I laughed, pulling her closer to me. "No, not at all."

We made love that night with the fervor of newlyweds. Susan was urgent and compliant, throwing her nakedness at me in a taunting and crucial way, as though this coupling, *this night*, were everything that mattered. She bucked and drew me back deeply and led me into her sex, so softly grainy, with a blowsy rawness that left us simultaneously empty and consumed.

"Well," we both said when it was over. "Well."

JOHAN CAME by the middle of the following week. We didn't have dinner together — he had some sort of meeting he had to attend — but the cocktails and conversation were relaxed and natural, as though we knew each other well. I even started to feel a little more relaxed about my job, and I realized quite a lot of it had to do with

our friendship with John. I knew that John Charon himself was not the cause of my upswing, but the occasion of this burgeoning friendship had an effect on me that broke a pattern I was happy and eager to eliminate.

The next week, one day before we had John over for another dinner, I beat Walter Hazlett at racquetball. No, I trounced the pompous son of a bitch, and then extended the trampling into the locker room. "I'm a good loser, Walter," I told him, "but a lousy winner."

During dinner the next night, John's conversation was focused much more on me than on Susan, and the final pocket of dusty apprehension about my wife bringing a man home was put to rest. Our conversations were brotherly and instructive. John had a quick mind and wit, something I like to think I possessed as well. Our talks were boisterous affairs, punctuated by intricate layers of humor, then laid flat by childish puns. He made me work my mind, and I felt I did the same for him. Usually Susan broke in when she felt like it, but it seemed we almost ignored her after a while. She appeared happy just listening to us or leaving us alone, busying herself with a book or a letter.

We never did go out to dinner with John. Our house seemed so comfortable with him in it that going out never really occurred to any of us again. Soon John began dropping by at least every other night, assuming his station in the green chair that had become his favorite. Sometimes he'd be able to stay only a half hour, sometimes half the night.

I finally noticed the change in the middle of one of our marathon bullshit sessions after a disastrous ravioli-and-green-beans supper. It was just a brief feeling of disconnection, as though I were adrift, untethered in a vast black space. It happened so suddenly that it was barely perceptible, but the feeling was so inconsonant with reality that it jolted my consciousness and must have given me a startled look.

John perceived it immediately. "Bill, are you all right?" he asked. "You look like someone just ran over your new puppy."

I drew my eyes to him, and he looked as familiar as my own face. "Yeah. . . . I guess so. I don't know what the hell happened. I just suddenly, I don't know, felt like I went away or something."

John gave me a concerned look. "Hey, buddy, when's the last time you had a checkup? I don't like hearing this."

I waved it off. "Really, John, it was not that big a deal. It just startled me, is all. I feel great, actually. Tip-top. That goddamn Walter

Hazlett won't even play me anymore. I'm a tiger."

"Still, it wouldn't hurt. . . ."

"You sound like Susan now."

"The last bastion of common sense in this house, probably."

Susan drifted into the living room. "Did I hear my name taken in vain?" she asked.

"John just paid you a compliment," I said, throwing John a glance that told him not to mention anything to Susan. "He remarked about your common sense."

"Well, thank you, John. It's nice to be recognized."

We all smiled politely, but there was one of those pauses where no one knows what to say. At least, I know I didn't know what to say. Susan broke the silence.

"I'll leave you two to your pedantic ramblings. I'm off to bed."

I got a kiss, John a wave, and Susan was out of the room. A feeling of calm washed over me, as though her departure were a relief. This bothered me, and although I didn't mention it to John, I thought he could sense my consternation.

Just before he left that evening, John said, "Bill, don't take this the wrong way. Maybe you've just been working too hard or wailing on Walter too frequently, but if you ever feel like seeing someone, I know a guy who's terrific. He specializes in job burnout, executive exhaustion, that type of stuff. Just say the word, and I'll arrange a meeting."

"A shrink, John?" You think I'm losing it?"

"No. Not at all. You are the most lucid man I know. He's not really a shrink. More like a situational coach. Don't let his degree fool you. He's a hell of a guy and makes the whole thing educational and painless."

I thought this over for a few seconds. "Sounds like you have firsthand knowledge."

"I do," John laughed. "He's my ex-wife's cousin, and he helped me through a few minor traumas."

He stood up to leave. "Well," I said, accepting his hand, "I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. No big deal. Good night, Bill. Maybe I'll drop by tomorrow."

"We'll be here. You might want to grab a Big Mac before you come over. That way you can hide dinner with your napkin and not starve."

We both chuckled, and I saw John out the front door. I made my

rounds, locking things up and turning out the kitchen and porch lights. When I entered the living room, I was hit with the feeling again, somewhat less this time, but the room seemed dominated by the green chair, as if this were the centerpiece of the house, the focal point of our lives.

I walked toward the chair and seemed drawn into it. Turning, I sat down heavily in the chair and felt it envelop me as a lover might close her legs and arms around my torso and draw me into her passionate solace. Fear trickled through me, and I stared straight ahead at the gaudy gold-framed wedding picture of Susan and me on the coffee table. Frozen in time, we smiled at the future, unafraid and confident.

The events and people at work were a blur of mechanical motion the rest of that week. It was as though I were living my days to arrive at the night. I finally broke down and discussed it with John late in the week at our house.

He was, as his custom, in the green chair, which was fine with me. That chair had become a symbol of whatever was coursing through me, that piranha churning through my psyche.

"I can't seem to stay focused, John," I said. "My work hasn't suffered, but when I get home, I seem to lose a grip on something I should have a lock on. But I don't even know what that should be. Shit . . . this makes no sense."

"Tell me more, Bill. Have you mentioned anything to Susan?"

"No. But she must sense something. We've been spending less and less time together."

"Well, that could be my fault, too. I have been a steady visitor."

"No, it's me. I'm starting to feel like a stranger in this house. Christ, John, I helped build this place with the carpenters fifteen years ago. I know every nail, every piece of insulation. . . . There's something. . . . I don't know."

"Where's Susan?"

"I don't know. I mean . . . at her sister's, some birthday party for her niece or something."

"Do you trust me, Bill?"

"You know I do, John. Christ, if it weren't for you. . . ."

It hit me again at that moment, but with a force that was relentless, and I was carried away in its rip. I was floating into blackness, and around the periphery of my vision, bright sparkles of light appeared, diamonds on

a perimeter of eternalness, a neon marquee on the perpetuity of time. The only physical impression I had was a faint needle-like sensation, but it was not isolated on any part of my body, more like a limb had gone to sleep, but this limb was my . . . dare I say it? . . . my being, the pneuma of my centered actuality . . . my soul.

I heard faint noises, light and airy punctuations in the vastness, muffled stabs of sound. Was I moaning? Did that sound come from me? The prospect of that gave whatever consciousness I had a sense of hope. If sound can emanate from my being, then I must still have the properties of Bill Gray. Even the sign of hope, by itself the most human of our sentiments, extended a life ring into this swirling, moonless oblivion.

Time became a phenomenon with no delineation. I had no actual experience of time, as if I were an infant observing his own birth and could not mark the passing of events with a definition of past or present experience. I tried to extend my arms and hands to look at them, but they were gone, painlessly removed, as were my legs and feet. An ignorant, massless essence, I was free-floating in a void that offered no breast to my lips and no echo to my screams. I was at the marrow of my being then, a formless surge of self; as timeless as white sun, as empty as the unalloyed blackness of Erebus.

As suddenly as it had washed over me and left me in that horribly indeterminate vacuum, as that second or two of nescience occurs when you are in an accident or struck on the head and wait for the physical recounting of your body — what hurts and how badly? — as suddenly as it seemed to have happened . . . so it ended.

I don't know how long I was gone or where, but I came to consciousness lying on the ground in the mournful heart of a tuneless night. I lay there for several minutes, hoping some explanation would offer itself to me. There was nothing mystical or unexplained about where I was now. I was on the wet earth, freshly mowed grass, in a place I sensed was familiar.

I collected my body to a sitting position and, finding nothing broken or sore, climbed shakily to my feet. The only sensation of my journey was a very minor buzzing in my ears. I walked directionless because I knew wherever I walked, answers would arrive. I had a perception of knowledge flowing into me then, and turning a corner by a hedge of sweet lilacs, their odor piercing my senses like the loving kisses of a grateful child, I knew where I was.

It was my own backyard. The house was dark and looked empty. I looked at my watch, but it had stopped, and it was impossible for me to sense in that stilled pitch of night if it was early or late. Awareness continued to surge through me, and answers to unasked questions came to me in bursts of shocking recognition. I knew then who I was and what I was expected to do, as though an unalterable script had been laid down before me. Be here; do this; say that.

I walked purposefully to the rear deck of the porch and laid my hand immediately on the extra key hanging underneath on a six-penny nail. I went around to the front door and unlocked it and returned the key to the nail. Stepping inside the house, I knew no one was home yet. I entered the front hall and waited for the intimacy of the house to come over me. I knew every board, every step.

But none of these old friends interested me. I walked through the darkness of the house to the living room and approached the green chair. Nothing had changed in the room, and the chair laid itself out for me; the maw of its opening gaped and beckoned for me to be seated. I turned and eased myself gently into its grasp. Across from me, in the dusky stillness, the gold-framed wedding picture was untouched.

A few minutes may have passed. Or a few hours. I heard the front door open, and a single set of footsteps clicked slowly down the front hall toward the kitchen. The sound drummed a rhythmic tattoo into the static calm of the house. The kitchen light came on with a snap, and half the living room was illumined with a ribbon of light. The picture smiled back at me on the coffee table.

After a while the front door opened again, and heavier footsteps marched down the hall. Then the living room was bathed in light as another switch was thrown. I heard her voice as it came through the kitchen into the living room.

"There you are, right on time," Susan was saying behind her. She entered the room and smiled at me.

"Darling," she said to him, "I'd like you to meet Bill Gray. Bill, this is my husband, John."

I stood to shake hands with John and glanced over at the coffee table and the smiling eyes of Susan and John in their wedding photo. John's hand was warm and familiar as we shook, then I settled back into the gentle comfort of the green chair.



SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

SKIMMING THE NEAREST

I RECEIVED A letter about a week ago, as I write this, from a reader who informed me, much more in sorrow than in anger, that I was wrecking his life. Apparently, as a result of reading my books and essays on science, he was inspired to do the same himself. On reflection, however, he decided that he couldn't because I had covered everything so thoroughly that I had left no room for him.

Naturally, I replied at once, because I am sensitive to any possibility that I make life difficult for others. I said something like the following:

"Why should it bother you what I write? You go ahead and write your own things in your own way, and there are bound to be people who would prefer your versions to mine. After all, do you suppose that when I write my books or essays I worry for one moment that someone else has already covered the subject? Never! Even if they have, I have my

own voice and my own pleasure in using it, and I expect you have yours."

I hope he takes my advice.

As a matter of fact, I have no hesitation in overlapping myself when necessary. This is my 390th F & SF essay, and if you went through every one of them carefully, you'd find a good deal of overlapping here and there, although I think there are no actual duplications.

For instance, it occurred to me to write an essay on the planet Mercury, and I decided I would call it "The Seventh Planet" because, in my opinion, it was the seventh planet (the word being used in the old Greek sense) to have been discovered. That having been decided I bent myself to the task of remembering what I had already written on the subject in this essay-series.

Unfortunately, although I keep meticulous records, I have to remember the title of a particular

essay before I can use my records to locate it, and I am so addicted to "cutesy" titles that I can't always tell from the title what I was talking about. Moreover, knowing the subject won't necessarily tell me what title I made use of.

In this case, however, it was easy. After a little thought, it came to me that I had indeed written an article on Mercury and had called it (what else?) "The Seventh Planet." It appeared in the March 1968 F & SF. That is nearly a quarter of a century ago so you'll forgive me, I know, that it took me a little thought to remember it. What's more, in the April 1968 issue, I wrote a continuation piece entitled "The Dance of the Sun." (You will find both essays in my collection *The Solar System and Back*, published by Doubleday in 1970.)

Those two essays dealt with Mercury and Venus, but primarily with their orbits, the manner in which they circled the Sun, the apparent motions of the Sun in their skies, and so on.

I can't prevent a little overlap, if I am to write a sensible essay on Mercury now, but let me talk a little about Mercury as a physical body, something I didn't do in those early essays because at the time, we didn't know as much about it as we do now. Naturally, I'll use a different title for this one, which is why I am

calling it "Skimming the Nearest."

First, let's set up our boundary conditions. There are uncounted numbers of independent objects in the Solar system, but let's leave out the small and inconsiderable ones: the dust particles, the meteoroids, the asteroids, the comets. Let's leave out the small and inconsiderable satellites. Let's even leave out Pluto, which is more nearly a medium-sized satellite that has somehow gotten loose than a respectable planet.

That will give us fifteen "worlds," that is, sizable objects. They are eight planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune; and seven satellites: Moon, Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto, Titan and Triton.

Five of these worlds make up the "inner Solar system": Mercury, Venus, Earth, Moon and Mars. The other ten are the major components of the "outer Solar system."

Mercury is the smallest of the eight planets. Its diameter is 4878 kilometers (3031 miles). Compare this with the diameter of the other three planets of the inner Solar system: Earth, 12,756 kilometers (7926 miles); Venus, 12,104 kilometers (7521 miles); and Mars, 6794 kilometers (4222 miles).

Mercury is, however, larger than the Moon, the diameter of which is

3476 kilometers (2160 miles).

There are, however, two satellites that are larger than Mercury. These are Ganymede, Jupiter's largest satellite, which has the diameter of 5262 kilometers (3270 miles); and Titan, Saturn's largest satellite, with a diameter of 5150 kilometers (3200 miles). Jupiter's second largest satellite, Callisto, has a diameter almost equal to that of Mercury, 4800 kilometers (2982 miles).

From our lordly position on Earth, we can look down on these smaller worlds as comparatively insignificant, but we get a truer picture if we consider the surface areas. The Moon, which is the smallest of the eight worlds we have just considered, has a surface area of 38 million square kilometers (14.7 million square miles), which is about as large as Africa and Europe put together. That's not bad for a "small" world — plenty of room to get lost in.

Mercury and Callisto have surface areas that are just about twice as great: 75 million square kilometers (29 million square miles). That is as large as Africa and Asia put together. Ganymede and Titan have surface areas of 85 million square kilometers (33 million square miles), as large as Africa, Asia, and Europe put together.

As for Mars, that has a surface

area of 145 million square miles, just about as large as the entire land area of Earth, while Venus has a surface area nearly that of Earth (land and water).

These are all respectable worlds, you see.

In a way, a truer measure of the size of a world is its mass. After all, you can have a world made of balsa wood, so to speak, and another made of platinum. The former may bulk larger in volume, but the latter will be more massive, and it is mass that governs the gravitational field.

The Moon, for instance, has a mass of 73.5 trillion trillion grams, and let's set that equal to one.

In that case, here are the masses for the 8 worlds we are considering:

Moon	1.00
Callisto.....	1.47
Titan.....	1.83
Ganymede.....	2.02
Mercury.....	4.47
Mars	8.70
Venus	66.7
Earth	81.3

You can notice two things from this list. First, the Earth has just about half the mass of all the worlds in the inner Solar system. Second, Mercury may still be the smallest of the eight planets, but it is distinctly more massive than any of the satellites. It is $2\frac{1}{4}$ times as massive as Ganymede, the largest and most

massive of the satellites.

This reflects itself in the surface gravity, which depends on the mass of the world (the larger the mass, the more intense the surface gravity) and the size of the world (the smaller the radius, the more intense the surface gravity).

Here are the surface gravities for our eight worlds, if Earth's surface gravity is set equal to one:

Moon	0.16
Callisto.....	0.12
Titan.....	0.13
Ganymede	0.14
Mercury	0.38
Mars	0.38
Venus	0.95
Earth	1.00

Notice that the outer-Solar system satellites, Callisto, Titan, and Ganymede, are fluffy worlds built up largely of icy materials so that their extra size carries the surface away from the center without building up very much additional mass. The surface gravity of all four satellites is about the same, therefore, with the Moon, the smallest of the four but the most compact, having rather the edge.

Again, Mercury, a compact world, has the same surface gravity as Mars, a distinctly larger, but less compact world. A 70-kilogram person (154 pounds) would weigh 11.2 kilograms (24.6 pounds) on the Moon and 8.4 kilograms (18.5

pounds) on Callisto, but 26.6 kilograms (58.5 pounds) on either Mercury or Mars.

Another interesting extreme about Mercury is that it is the closest of all the worlds to the Sun. Its orbit is distinctly elliptical, more so than any of the other seven planets and more so than any of the seven satellites circling their planets.

The measure of the ellipticity is the "eccentricity," which can vary from zero for a perfect circle to one for an infinitely long ellipse (i.e. a "parabola.") For instance, the eccentricity of Earth's orbit about the Sun is 0.0167, quite close to zero. Venus's orbit does even better with an eccentricity of 0.0068, while Mars's orbit has one of 0.093. The Moon's orbit around the Earth has an eccentricity of 0.055.

Now compare this with the eccentricity of Mercury's orbit, which is 0.206. This means that the distance of Mercury from the Sun varies more greatly (proportionately to the size of its orbit) than does that of any other world; or any of the four worlds we have been discussing that circle planets.)

At one point in its orbit, Mercury can be as close as 45.9 million kilometers (28.5 million miles) from the Sun. That is its "perihelion," and it is only 3/10 the distance of

the Earth from the Sun. At the opposite end of its orbit, the "aphelion," Mercury is at 69.7 kilometers (43.3 million miles) from the Sun. The average distance is usually taken as the "semi-major axis"; that is the perihelion plus the aphelion, divided by two. It is 57.8 kilometers (35.9 million miles).

There are objects that approach the Sun more closely at perihelion than Mercury does. There is the asteroid Icarus, for one, and the recently discovered Phaethon. There are also a number of comets that skim by the Sun at very close distances — some so close that they actually drop into the Sun. In every single case, however, these asteroids and comets are far removed (even very far removed) from the Sun at aphelion.

Of all the objects that circle the Sun, Mercury has (as far as we know) the smallest semi-major axis. This means that its period of revolution about the Sun is smaller than any other object, for Mercury's period of revolution is only 88 days long.

Being so close to the Sun, it races along its orbit more quickly than does any other planet. Earth's average orbital speed is 29.8 kilometers per second (18.5 miles per second). Mercury at aphelion moves along at 38.7 kilometers per second (24.0 miles per second) and at peri-

helion at 56.6 kilometers per second (35.2 miles per second). Those objects which approach the Sun more closely than Mercury move even faster at perihelion, but no known object has a faster *average* orbital speed than Mercury has.

During the 19th Century, it was found that Mercury's perihelion progressed around its orbit slowly. It was supposed to do so because of various gravitational pulls upon Mercury. However, in 1845, the French astronomer Urbain J.J. Leverrier (1811-1877) carefully calculated all the pulls on Mercury and found that the point of perihelion advanced at a very small rate in excess of that predicted by gravitation. The excess amounted to 43 arc seconds per century, which meant that the perihelion would make a complete circle of the orbit, for unexplained reasons, in just over 3 million years.

This means, if I may trust my back-of-the-envelope calculations that every time Mercury circles the Sun, the perihelion advances by 209 kilometers in defiance of the law of gravity. This was not explained until 1916 when Albert Einstein (1879-1955) worked out his Theory of General Relativity. Einstein's modification of Newton's equations neatly explained the advance of Mercury's perihelion.

Other planets also had a relativistic perihelion advance, but the

farther they were from the Sun, the smaller it was. What's more, the more nearly circular the orbit, the more difficult it was to pinpoint the perihelion accurately. The combination of Mercury's closeness to the Sun and its high orbital eccentricity made it ideal in this respect, and it offered the first corroboration of Einstein's theory.

Astronomical bodies consist of four classes of substance, in order of increasing density and decreasing quantity: 1) gases (chiefly hydrogen and helium); 2) ices (chiefly water, ammonia, methane, and carbon dioxide); 3) rocks (chiefly magnesium and aluminum silicates); and 4) metals (chiefly nickel-iron). They arrange themselves in strata, the gases on top, the ices below, the rocks farther below and the metals at the center.

Very large bodies possess all four but are overwhelmingly gaseous in nature. This is true, within our Solar system, of the Sun and of the four gas giants: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.

Smaller bodies can't retain the gases and may be mostly icy in nature, as, for example, Triton, Titan, Ganymede, and Callisto. If warm enough, such bodies lose most of their ices and are chiefly rocky.

Europa, for instance, is a rocky

object with a coating of ice (and possibly liquid water). Io retains ices in the form of sulfur compounds. Mars and Venus retain carbon dioxide, while Earth retains an atmosphere and an ocean.

The ice content of the worlds in the inner Solar system is, however, minor and can be ignored. If they are, then Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury and the Moon are essentially rocky worlds with metallic cores.

The densities of these five worlds are:

Moon	3.3 grams per cubic centimeter
Mars	3.9 grams per cubic centimeter
Venus	5.24 grams per cubic centimeter
Mercury	5.43 grams per cubic centimeter
Earth	5.52 grams per cubic centimeter

The comparatively low density of the Moon and of Mars indicates that their structure is almost entirely rocky in nature. A metallic core, while it must surely exist, must also be comparatively small.

Venus, Mercury and Earth are the only worlds in the Solar system that have *large* metallic cores, as is evidenced by their comparatively high density.

Earth has the highest density of all, but that is deceiving. Some of the density is the result of the high compression of the innermost regions of the planet. Since Earth is distinctly larger than the other

worlds of the inner Solar system, its compression effect is great. If there were no such compression, the Earth would have a density of only 4.4 grams per cubic centimeter. Mercury, a smaller planet, has much less compression in its interior, and if that is imagined to be removed, Mercury's density would shrink only slightly to 5.3 grams per cubic centimeter.

This means that Mercury must have a larger metallic core in relationship to its total size than Earth has.

Thus Earth's metallic core forms a smaller sphere within the larger rocky sphere of the planet. Earth's metallic core is 5360 kilometers (3320 miles) in diameter. This is fully 42 percent of the Earth's total diameter, but volume varies as the cube of the diameters, so Earth's iron core makes up just about 1/14 the volume of the Earth. The other 13/14 is rock.

Mercury, on the other hand, is estimated to have an iron core that is only 3660 kilometers (2275 miles) in diameter, so it is only 1/3 the volume of Earth's iron core. However, Mercury is far the smaller planet so its metal core, though small in comparison to Earth's, makes up 2/5 the volume of the planet.

No world in the Solar system is nearly as metallic as Mercury is,

and one has to ask why.

Mercury formed in the very hottest part of the dust cloud that gave birth to the planets, and perhaps conditions were such as to render that part of the cloud comparatively rock-poor and iron-rich.

Another possible explanation, and perhaps a more likely one, is that Mercury, in its early history, was struck by another sizeable body (as we now think Earth was, in a collision that ended in the formation of the Moon). It may be that much of Mercury's rocky layers were smashed away but that the proximity of the Sun prevented the debris from coalescing into a satellite. Instead, the debris may have been driven away by the Sun's powerful primordial Solar wind. Mercury would thus be left with: a) no satellite, b) an unusually small overall size, and c) an impoverished rocky outer layer.

It would, however, be useful if Mercury could be studied in detail. It might give us hints as to the history of the early Solar system that we could not easily obtain in other ways.

Actually, Mercury was examined closely only once.

On November 3, 1973, "Mariner X" was launched. It passed by the Moon and then, on February 5, 1974, it passed by Venus at just

5800 kilometers (3600 miles) above the cloud layer of that planet and sent back useful data.

It then headed for Mercury, and on March 19, 1974, it passed within 700 kilometers (435 miles) of its surface.

It moved into an orbit about the Sun in such a way as to make one circuit in 176 days, or just twice Mercury's year. This brought it back to Mercury in the same spot as before, because each time the probe made one circuit of the Sun, Mercury was making two. Mariner X passed Mercury a second time on September 21, 1974, and then a third time on March 16, 1975. On the third pass, it skimmed within 327 kilometers (203 miles) of Mercury's surface. (This is why I am calling this essay "Skimming the Nearest.")

After the third pass, Mariner X had consumed the gas that kept it in a stable position, and it was thereafter useless for further study of the planet.

Mariner X confirmed Mercury's rotation rate and temperature and showed that it had no satellite and no significant atmosphere. It determined its diameter, mass, and density.

The photographs it took of Mercury showed a landscape that looked very much like that of the Moon. There were craters everywhere with

the largest one photographed about 200 kilometers (125 miles) in diameter.

On the whole, Mercury had fewer craters than the Moon per unit area, particularly larger craters. This may be because Mercury's strong gravitational field prevented meteor collisions from making such large splashes.

The Moon, especially the side that faces us, has large "maria." These are relatively flat basins that early in the Moon's history must have formed as lava flows. Mercury is not as rich in basins as the Moon is. The largest one sighted is about 1400 kilometers (870 miles) across, and is called "Caloris" ("Heat"), because it is just about at the spot on Mercury that is under the Sun at zenith, when Mercury is at perihelion and the Sun's heat is the greatest.

Mercury possesses long scarps, or cliffs, that are several hundred kilometers long and about 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) high. These cliffs may be cracks that appeared in the outermost crust as the interior cooled and shrank.

In addition, Mercury reflects more Sunlight than the Moon does, and its color is not quite the same. That means its chemical composition is probably significantly different from that of the Moon.

Unfortunately, each time that

Mariner X returned to Mercury it viewed pretty much the same portion of Mercury's surface. The result was that photographs were only taken of $3/8$ of Mercury's entire surface. The remaining $5/8$ may be much like we've seen, but we can never be sure. The Solar system has been too full of surprises in the last thirty years for astronomers to take anything for granted.

There are, however, no plans at the moment for a return to Mercury, so astronomers will have to endure the inability to satisfy their curiosity in this respect.

The most puzzling discovery that Mariner X made concerning Mercury was the presence of the planet's small magnetic field.

Magnetic fields are common in connection with astronomical bodies, but there are two requirements. First, there must be a core that is liquid and can carry an electric current. Second, there must be some force that sets that liquid to swirling, for a rotating electric current will set up a persistent magnetic field.

The Sun, for instance, has a core in which matter has broken down or degenerated to free electrons and free nuclei, which are each electrically charged. The Sun's rotation swirls the core material and sets up a magnetic field that produces the Sunspots, somehow.

The gas giants have cores that contain liquid metallic hydrogen, and their rapid rotations set them to swirling and produce intense magnetic fields. This is particularly true in the case of Jupiter, which is the largest planet, has the hottest core, and the most rapid rotation.

Earth has a magnetic field because it has a liquid iron core that is set swirling by the planet's rotation.

As for the remaining worlds of the inner Solar system, the Moon does not have a magnetic field because it has no liquid iron core to speak of, and it rotates so slowly that no swirls would be set up in such a core even if it possessed one. Mars rotates fast enough to set up swirls, but apparently it has very little in the way of a metallic core; and it is too small to keep it liquid, so it has no magnetic field. Finally, Venus is certainly large enough to have a liquid metallic core, but it rotates on its axis with such excessive slowness that it sets up no swirls and has no magnetic field.

Why is it, then, that Mercury has a magnetic field, only a small one to be sure, but it's there.

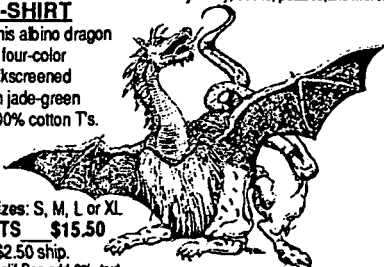
Of course, Mercury has a liquid metallic core, larger in proportion to the planet as a whole than any other planet has. Nevertheless, Mercury is so small that it is hard to see how that core can be heated



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Coming Soon

Next month: "Guide Dog," a refreshingly different and quite moving science fiction novelet by Mike Conner.

Soon: New stories by Mike Resnick, Bradley Denton, Bruce Sterling, Ben Bova, Ellen Kushner, Wayne Wightman and many others.

The May issue is on sale April 2. Send us the coupon on page 158 to enter a subscription.

sufficiently to liquefy it, unless it is not pure metal.

There are suggestions that sulfur is present, too, forming metallic sulfides that melt at temperatures lower than the metals themselves. If as much as 7 percent of the metallic core is sulfur, it should remain liquid.

But then, what would make that iron core swirl? Mercury's rate of rotation is very slow, slower than that of our Moon, and much slower than that of Mars. Granted that the

Moon has no metal core to speak of, Mars at least must have one, albeit a smaller one than Mercury; and if Mercury can keep its core liquid why cannot the distinctly larger Mars do the same for its core? And if Mercury's slow rate of rotation is nevertheless fast enough to set up some swirling, should not Mars's considerably faster rotation rate do the same? Yet Mars does not have a magnetic field and Mercury does have at least a small one.

It's rather a puzzle.

Ray Aldridge's last story here was "The Beastbreaker," (February 1990). His compelling new novella is the story of a dying longhauler named John Thinwolf, stranded on an odd and menacing outpost called Jaworld . . .

GATE OF FACES

By Ray Aldridge



JOHN THINWOLF DROVE HIS boat north, slicing the green seas into rainbowed spray. The

sunlight soaked into his back; the pain blockers did their work. The last redskin was as happy as a dying man could be.

At noon the hammer-headed towers of a Forbidden City lifted over the horizon.

Under the ancient walls, he shut off the engine. A current carried him slowly along the scarred alloy flank of the City.

"What were you?" Thinwolf shouted, but the City made no reply. He thought: One of the silent ones.

He drifted. He took a shot of tissue stabilants and a flagon of fruit-flavored syrup, blood-red and thick as honey — his lunch.

He was always thirsty, and the syrup made it worse. The boat's med unit prohibited him from drinking anything else. "Injuns can't drink," he said, looking at the empty flagon. His kidneys had given out a week ago.

On his thigh he wore a dialysis coupling, which sucked at him with a thousand tiny mouths, cleansing his blood. "Injuns can't do much at all anymore: can't drink, can't piss, can't sleep. Can't make long-range plans." He threw the flagon; it shattered against the City. The fragments glittered into the blue depths, falling down the black cliff of the City's hull, and Thinwolf watched them disappear with the same solemn concentration that he now gave to every event, no matter how insignificant.

After a while the current carried him around the curve of the City into the shade. He shivered and went below for a jacket.

When he came back on deck, the current was sweeping his vessel toward the City's seagate, which was flanked by a pair of deities carved in low relief. They spread high-arched, batlike wings, and their faces seemed vaguely reptilian. Did they resemble the vanished inhabitants of the City, or were they as alien to that race as so many human gods had been to humanity?

Inside, he could see towers studded with slender projecting balconies. Landing ramps? From the lower levels, steep slides fell into the dark water. Thinwolf scratched his head. Flying amphibians? Arboreal frogs? He laughed; the day had given him something strange and wonderful. Not a waste, then. . . .

He let the current carry him almost to the gate before he switched on the engine and backed away. Some of the empty Cities were dead, and thus safe to enter, but the bit of life remaining to Thinwolf was precious to him.

"On to the next," he said, and opened the throttle. The boat leaped away, back into the sunlight.

At twilight, Thinwolf cut the engines. Sometimes he would press on through the night, but just now he was too tired. An unpleasant thought came to him: Would he ever be less tired than he was now? Would he ever spend the night driving the boat hard through the darkness? So many endings had come; so many pleasures had slipped suddenly from him, unnoticed at first.

"No," he muttered. "I won't think that. Not before I have to. Hah!"

He took his evening injections, and another flagon of the syrup. For a while he lay on the settee in the boat's small, comfortable salon, willing himself to sleep. The effort fatigued him even more, and after an hour he

gave it up and went out to the foredeck, where the canvas-shrouded figure of the hulk lay. He cast off the covering, looked down on the metal body he would soon wear.

"You're a passable redskin," he said. The face resembled Thinwolf's a little. Its cheekbones were sharper, its eyes black instead of brown. Countless tiny articulated scales formed the skin, like dark bronze dusted with glittering motes. Though frozen now, it was capable of a fleshlike suppleness. The hulk's chest was broad and deep, its hands powerful, its thick neck set into massive shoulders. Heavy tie-down straps secured it to the deck.

Thinwolf rapped his knuckles on the hulk's chest, which gave back a dense *thunk*. "You and me, we're going to cut a swath one day. Hah?"

He was, quite abruptly, lonely. He fumbled open the access plate in the hulk's side. He caressed the wired-down ACTIVATE switch, then pressed the TEST MODE rocker. Light came into the hulk's black eyes, and it blinked. "Good evening, John," it said. "Do you wish to tell me another story?"

"Yes, another story, if you like. Let's see. Have I told you about how Coyote left the World of Roads?"

"No. That sounds interesting, John." The hulk's voice, though deep and resonant, had a childlike diction.

But it was not a child, Thinwolf reminded himself; it was a superficial machine personality, installed to facilitate testing. Though sometimes he worried that his occasional activation of the hulk was causing an evolution in the machine's capabilities — there was no technical reason why the hulk could not develop a mature personality, given sufficient input.

He shrugged off the thought, and began. . . .

A long time ago, in the Time before Time, Coyote was cruising the World of Roads in his fine new car. On the World of Roads, there's no place you can't get to in your car, and a lot of scenery — but no good place to stop. As fine a place as it was, a day came when Coyote became restless. His hands were tired of the steering wheel, and since he had been driving with the top down, that beautiful new-car smell had all blown away.

The Trickster was always the most easily bored of the First Folk.

By and by, Coyote turned onto a road that ran straight as a bowstring between two mighty basalt cliffs. The canyon was so deep that he could

see only a thin crack at the top, through which the red sky glowed. "It's like the line of true blood that carries my wisdom forward to those who come after," Coyote said, for he loved to talk like that. Coyote thought he was wise, but in fact, he was only clever, which is very different.

Coyote put his foot down hard. His new car leaped away down the road, which was smooth and empty. Coyote went faster and faster, until the black rock on either side blurred and grew darker yet, so that Coyote seemed to be flying through starless space. "This is like the end of time," he said, "when nothing will be left in the universe but my wisdom."

Pretty soon Coyote began to think that the road was growing narrower, and in fact, it was. He looked up and saw that the cliffs were closing together, so that only an occasional red sky-gleam flickered. "That is like the last bead of blood drained from my last descendant," Coyote said. Coyote was easily frightened, like any being with too much imagination, and he saw that he was going much faster than he had intended to go. He tried to slow down, but the pedal was frozen, and the brakes were gone. If anything, the car ran faster still, and the canyon had become a tunnel.

At first, Coyote was angry — at the car, at the road, at the canyon — and he shouted and cursed and beat on the steering wheel. After a long time, he grew tired, and finally he sat silent and still, and his hands slipped from the wheel. "So I must die," he said to himself. "I had not planned on this so soon. I am not wearing my best moccasins; I had barely begun to compose my death chant." And these things were true, because Coyote had expected to live forever, as does everyone.

Thinwolf paused to get his breath, which seemed to hide from him for a moment. The hulk watched him, eyes empty and waiting. Thinwolf sucked in the cool night air, composed himself, and went on. . . .

The canyon tightened even more, so that the sides of Coyote's new car began to strike sparks from the stone. Still the car did not slow, and soon Coyote was surrounded by heat and fiery light. "This is like riding a shooting star down from the heavens; at least I will not die in darkness," he said. Coyote was not wise enough to know that all must die in darkness, that there are no glorious deaths.

But Coyote did not die. After a while the rocks took such a grip on Coyote's car that it had to stop, and so it did, grinding and screaming. At

this, Coyote was encouraged. "Perhaps today is not my day to die, after all. I will just get out and walk back out the way I came," he said.

When he got out, he saw that the canyon had closed behind him, like a great black-throat on an insignificant morsel. There was not even a crack in the rock. Coyote had no way to go but forward. He took one last look at his beautiful ruined car.

For a while he could walk upright. Then the canyon contracted even more, and Coyote had to walk in a crouch, then on all fours, then crawl on his belly. Still he pressed on, because Coyote was not wise enough to know he was trapped. Behind him the canyon closed tight, with a sound like mountains grinding together. Finally he could crawl no farther, and he felt the canyon pressing on his feet. He could feel a breath of sweet air in his face, so he knew the crack led out, but he could not force himself into it.

"Then I must make myself smaller," Coyote said. He dropped his man shape like an old coat and became a small, wild dog. In this form he crawled on, but the crevice tightened, until he could go no farther. Coyote said, "Well, I must become a rabbit," and in this form he went on.

Finally the crack was too small for the rabbit to continue. Coyote had always disliked snakes, but the breeze still blew, and the canyon pressed at his back paws, so he shrugged his rabbit shoulders and became a snake. For a time he slithered along rapidly, and the breeze grew stronger, and he began to believe he would get out. "This will make a fine story to tell to the other First Folk," Coyote hissed, and he was already at work adding colorful details to this story, when the crack abruptly narrowed again. Somehow Coyote was not surprised, but he had come too far to give up. He began to think that he should have sung his death chant when he had still had a voice to sing with, since snakes cannot sing, but he gathered all his power, and changed himself into a worm as narrow as a thread. But the worm was too narrow to hold Coyote's soul. The last thing he felt was a great pain, as his soul fled.

Thinwolf looked at the hulk again. It had turned away its head so that Thinwolf could not see its face. "Is that the end, John?" it asked in a muffled voice.

"No," Thinwolf said. "Shall I go on? There's only a little more."

"Please," the hulk said.

The worm crawled on, because it knew nothing else to do, and finally it came to the end of the great canyon, which was a hole in the ground no bigger than a pinprick. The worm came up into the sunlight of another world. It assumed the form of a man again, but Coyote was gone, and a thousand thousand years passed before he returned to his own body. And that is the story of how Coyote left the World of Roads.

"Did you like it?" Thinwolf asked the hulk.

The hulk rolled its handsome head and looked up into the night sky. "Yes, John," the hulk said. "It was another good story. Something in it calls to me, though it made me angry and afraid. Those are still uncomfortable emotions for me, perhaps because I am so new."

Thinwolf rubbed at his face, looked out across the dark sea. "They're uncomfortable for me, too. I'm far too old."

"Why do you tell such stories?"

Thinwolf had no answer, so he reached out to switch the hulk off.

"Wait, John." The hulk spoke humbly. "Could you leave me on standby?"

"Why?"

"I know I must hold your mind someday; this is my destiny, and I go gladly to it, as I was designed to do, but first . . . I have thoughts I wish to think. Simple thoughts, I think; still, they are mine."

"Why not?" Thinwolf left the foredeck, went below. He lay in his bunk, unable to sleep.

He remembered.

THE DISEASE had begun to kill him halfway through the long voyage from Dilvermoon to Jaworld. The early stages were agony, but he could still act. He instructed the ship to seek the nearest SeedCorp outpost, and retreated to his acceleration cocoon, and to the cool blessing of the morphine drip. The ship roused him as they approached the water world of Passage.

The pain had eased somewhat; he was able to get to the console and send a Mayday to the SeedCorp orbital platform.

When the screen lit with the incoming signal, he pushed back the pain, tried to smile disarmingly.

The factor had a thin, hard face, with gray hair piled on her head in a froth of curls. "What is your difficulty, longhauler *Summerlodge*?"

"I'm ill," Thinwolf said. Sweat ran down his neck, dripped off his chest onto the gleaming console. "I require the use of your med unit; mine is inadequate."

The factor frowned. "You are alone? You have no diagnosis?"

"Alone. No diagnosis."

The factor sat back, away from the comm unit's pickup field. Thinwolf stared at a swirling pattern of pastel color. "Our quarantine regs are stringent, *Summerlodge*. I'm not sure how we can help you; at the moment our staff is minimal. Can you not reach a settled world?"

A flash of rage burned free from the pain. "I am *dying*. If you will not allow me access to your med unit, I *will* die, but before I do, I'll launch a message torpedo to Dilvermoon. This vessel is under contract to SeedCorp; you must assist me, or SeedCorp will face litigation from my heirs." He saw no reason to mention that he had no heirs. "You will be terminated without compensation; this is SeedCorp policy, as you must know." The speech exhausted him, and he let his head sag.

In the end the factor allowed him to board an empty warehouse cylinder, in which she and her crew had previously placed their med unit.

When he emerged from its diagnostic cavity, the med unit spoke in professionally sympathetic terms. No hope, it told him. A tailored virus had invaded every cell of his body, and the med unit lacked the tech to pry it out. It could not even find an uncontaminated cell from which to clone a replacement body, and had that been possible, it had no acceleration tank in which a body could be brought to maturity before the virus killed him.

"I can keep you alive for a short time, and make the pain bearable; otherwise I am helpless," said the med unit. "You have clever enemies. Citizen Thinwolf. They have thoroughly murdered you."

"How long?" Thinwolf asked.

"Four to six standard weeks, perhaps a little longer."

"Ah. Cold storage?"

"Not equipped for it here, Citizen Thinwolf."

He would die. He would die.

After a time his heart thawed, pumped him full of fear. He called the factor, shouted incoherently.

"This is a very minor outpost," she said. "Once a year a circuit freighter calls, and we load on whatever artifacts the free-lance salvagers have managed to take from the Cities. We're mostly end-of-the-liners here; the company doesn't care much about us."

He caught at the word. "Cities?"

"They'll do you no good." The factor had a glimmer of pity in her eyes. "The Forbidden Cities. They're closed, the live ones, and even if you could get into one and persuade it to help you, well, they're of alien manufacture. What would they know of human diseases?"

The factor's image swam in the monitor; Thinwolf was shocked to feel the heat of tears on his face. "Listen," she said. "The med unit assures me that your disease is too specific to be contagious. Come aboard the main module, and we'll make you as comfortable as we can."

He bowed his head. "Thank you. A kind offer. I'll let you know."

Back aboard the *Summerlodge*, he went back into the cocoon, where he lay for a day and a night, allowing the palliatives the med unit had prescribed to flush the worst of the pain away.

When he emerged, he felt strong enough to take on the task of ordering his last days. He listened to his favorite music; every phrase seemed unbearably poignant. He prepared his favorite dinner, and tasted a bit from each dish, in defiance of the med unit. Each flavor seemed unbearably intense. He ran his favorite sensie tape, and wept to hear other voices, to see other faces, to touch healthy flesh.

Thinwolf was, in a pragmatic sense, no longer an employee of Seed-Corp, and thus beyond their retribution. So, out of curiosity, he broke the seals on his cargo compartment.

The cargo, consigned to one of Jaworld's wealthy planters, consisted of an emperor's ransom in toys. Thinwolf found a beautiful carousel equipped with several dozen saddled menagerie beasts, each sculpted of semiprecious stone and caparisoned with silver and gold. He found a magnificent bullet car, armored in black steel, enameled with rich designs in red and blue, upholstered in ermine. He found an antique bed, its tall carnelian headboard carved with naked, sloe-eyed goddesses. He found a hundred other useless treasures.

But there was a lovely little surface boat, outfitted for a long cruise, tied down on a launching pallet. In its salon was a med unit as good as the one on the SeedCorp platform.

Last and best, there was the conservator hulk, built for the rich planter. The dark Nilotic features were astonishingly similar to Thinwolf's own pale ones. It was blank, ready to imprint, and offered him survival. The thought that his flesh would die still saddened him, but he told himself: Be sensible. You're not a redskin anymore. What matter that your connection to the Earth dissolves. The Earth is far away, and forgotten.

He called the factor. "I'm going down to your groundside station, with your permission. I've an urge to feel the pull of a planet one last time."

The factor was puzzled, but made no objection. "No recreational facilities, though, and I have only one man down there now, Coedi Kimpt. He's an odd one, a little rough around the edges, but he gets along well with the scavengers."

"I'll be polite," Thinwolf promised.

A day later his ship lay cooling in the lagoon at the center of the artificial island SeedCorp used for a groundside base. Summerlodge shared the lagoon with a small SeedCorp shuttle. On the north side of the island, a warehouse complex raised blocky shapes against the sky, and a transverse crane arced over one end of the lagoon.

An autod dinghy came out and carried Thinwolf back to the dock. Coedi Kimpt waited for him there, a small man with a sleek blond head and long, muscular arms.

Kimpt helped him from the dinghy, with surprisingly gentle hands. "Well, so you're John Thinwolf. I'm Coedi." The little man smiled a sweet, open smile, and his tiny eyes glistened. "They tell me I'm the scum at the bottom of SeedCorp's barrel; how high do you float, John?"

Thinwolf laughed. "Not so high as I used to, Coedi. In fact, I think I'll be leaking out the drain pretty soon."

Coedi took him to the visitors' hostel, made him comfortable in a small room with a view of the open ocean.

When the sea was dark, Thinwolf walked the path to the trading post, which showed narrow, yellow-glowing windows to the night. He pushed into the store. Shelves crowded with crates rose up to the ceiling. Coedi sat under a single glowbulb, smoking a pipe. "Come in, John," he said. "Drink? Smoke? Skinpopper?" He held out a tray full of poppers. "Upstairs tries to keep me happy, so none of them have to come down here. I've passed up six rotations so far this year — they love me in the sky."

Thinwolf raised his hands. "Thank you, but I can't. The quackbox

won't let me do anything that's even a little bit fun; says it'll kill me quick."

"O.K. But it's a lousy way to spend your last days. Sit down." Coedi indicated a high-backed chair. "So. What brings you to our little resort?"

Thinwolf lowered himself into the chair. The pain had diminished to a tolerable level under the palliatives, but he was still weary. "Tired of shipboard, Coedi. I haven't been dirtside in years. Might be my last chance."

Coedi leaned forward. "Might?"

Thinwolf studied the trader. Backwaters like Passage were settling basins for SeedCorp's worst and best. He felt, with illogical conviction, that Coedi was the latter. "Redskin instinct," he muttered.

"What?"

"Sorry, thinking aloud. What would you say if I asked for the use of your crane?"

Coedi laughed. "Gonna pop your goody box, eh? Gonna have a good time *anyway*! The crane . . . you'll have to tie me up before you use it. Let's see, I got a good piece of rope here somewhere." He half-rose, as if to go off among the dark shelves.

"Wait, not right now. . . . But thank you."

"Why not right now? You got time to burn, right." But Coedi sat down, smiling his innocent smile.

"Maybe I do. . . ." He told Coedi about the hulk, about the boat.

The trader's face filled with delight. "Going fishing? Gonna wait till it hurts too much before you twitch the switch?"

"Might fish. Might just cruise around and see the sights."

"The sights. What would those be?" Coedi seemed amused.

"Oh. Well, the Forbidden Cities, I guess. Is there anything else?"

"No. But I tell you, there's not a lot to look at in most of them. The dead ones were cleaned out long ago, and the live ones will kill you. And John, you got to stay away from the dying ones. Sometimes they blow themselves up, at the last, or burn. Though mainly they're dangerous because those are the ones that the bonepickers tie up to, and the pickers are a hard bunch. There's some would be happy to cut your throat and steal your boat." Coedi spoke earnestly.

"Will it be hard to avoid them?"

Coedi rubbed his chin. "No, guess not. You shouldn't have much

trouble getting away from any pickers you come across. They generally run displacement hulls — slow, but they can move a lot of cargo with a lot less energy. That squirtboat you're about to steal, it oughta walk away from anything that's out there. You'll be O.K., long as you don't get drunk with them."

Thinwolf laughed. "No fear. Well, tell me more about the Cities?"

Coedi's eyes gleamed. He settled back with his pipe and talked.

The Cities were already ancient when the first humans had arrived on Passage. Several scientific expeditions had disappeared into various of the living Cities before the danger became common knowledge. Of the three or four thousand Cities that drifted the world-ocean, perhaps a hundred were dead, already looted down to bare metal when humans had first found them. Perhaps six hundred were in various stages of decay, their defenses erratic enough to give marauding humans a fair chance of survival. The remainder were fully functional but, presumably, empty. Some of the living Cities had permitted explorers to enter and leave, as long as they attempted to take no souvenirs, and those explorers had found no inhabitants.

"My guess is they're not mean, the Cities. Just unreliable," Coedi said. "You be careful about trusting 'em, John. Some of the worst will invite you in for tea, sweet as you could want, but if you go in, no one'll ever see you again. No malice, maybe, but gone is gone. If you go, be careful."

"And all of them alien?"

"So the experts say. Makes sense, since they're all old as hell, and SeedCorp didn't get here till seven hundred years ago. But now you mention it, there's a bonepicker legend about a human City. Or anyway, a City with a human face."

Interesting, thought Thinwolf. "Oh? Tell me."

"Not much to tell. The pickers don't talk about it much; they're all hoping to be the one to find it. But it's supposed to keep to the high northern latitudes, just below the iceberg line. Cold, smoky water up there, strange seabeasts, incredible auroras — good setting for a legend, I guess. Anyhow, some of the old pickers will tell you about the time they saw it, sailing through the night fogs. How there's a seagate of gold, fifty meters high, carved with a thousand faces. Human faces. The Gate of Faces. This City's supposed to sail fast; none of those who saw it could stay close. They all tried to mark it, of course, but they could never

find it again. Some think it swims under the sea most of the time."

Thinwolf saw more than a casual story in Coedi's face. "Be something to find it," he said.

"Yes," Coedi said. "If someone could get inside, and out again with something. . . . He could buy his way out of here. Be someone." In Coedi's eyes was a sad admission. "Someday, John, I'm going to kiss off SeedCorp and take a boat north. When I'm braver."

In the morning, Coedi helped Thinwolf swing out the beautiful little boat and strap the hulk to its foredeck. Thinwolf waved good-bye without looking back.

That was three weeks before.

AT DAWN, restless sleep came, and remembrance bled seamlessly into dream.

Thinwolf's dream self, strong and well, ran swiftly over the wave-tossed ocean. His legs splashed through the foamy crests; his feet sank lightly into the bright water. His heart thumped, slow and powerful, a tireless machine. In his left hand was a heavy war bow, reinforced with strips of horn, bound with glistening sinew. He felt the weight of a quiver on his back. Otherwise he was naked, except for a narrow breechclout. Glancing down, he saw that the breechclout was embroidered with interlocking microcircuit diagrams. A nameless fear tugged at him, but then he saw that he was mistaken, that the designs were only the familiar jagged spirals favored by the weavers of his tribe.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a white glitter on the northern horizon. He turned away from the sun and ran a little faster, feeling the hunter's joy.

The pod of buffalo whales swam deliberately, as yet unaware of him, their black humps lifting above the sea. Occasionally one spouted, sending high a plume of water, sweet-scented from their feeding in the sea-meadows. He approached upwind to within a hundred meters, then turned to run parallel to their course, staying in the troughs of the waves as much as possible, ducking through the crests. He counted a dozen of the great beasts: five cows, four calves, two yearlings, and an elder bull long winters past his prime. Thinwolf felt a twinge of anxiety. Where was the pod bull? He glanced down into the blue-black water beneath his feet; what did it conceal? The anxiety sharpened. Something was wrong; what?

The thought slid away from him, quick as a fish.

Then the bull rose, only fifty meters away. The bull surged closer, blocking Thinwolf from the pod, as if he were aware of Thinwolf's predatory intentions. The bull's hump was huge, covered with silky white fur. Thinwolf grew excited; he forgot his misgivings. Here was a sign, an omen of deep import.

The bull spouted, and Thinwolf saw that the water had a faint pink tinge, was tainted with the scent of blood. He wondered how many old arrows festered in the white whale's lungs, and sadness filled him. He took from his quiver an arrow tipped with a barbed obsidian point, nocked it, drew. "Let my arrow bring you rest, Great One," he whispered, and loosed.

The arrow disappeared into the whale's side as though into a breaking wave. For an instant nothing changed.

A red gout exploded from the whale's blowhole, and where it splattered down, the waves smoothed. The blood dripped from Thinwolf's arms, and his feet sank deeper into the sea, and he felt a paralyzing fear. He remembered that men could not run over the ocean.

The whale sounded without lifting his head to look at his killer.

Thinwolf could not move. He saw a future, a heartbeat from now: the wounded whale bursting from the depths, sharp horns ripping into Thinwolf's fragile flesh, tossing the ragged remnant high into the air. He waited, frozen, for lifetimes — then the whale burst through the surface.

Where the noble head should have been, a dozen clustered eyes glared, a hundred thin muscular tentacles writhed. Thinwolf did not recognize the creature.

The tentacles seized him. Their touch was like red-hot wire, and at last he was able to scream. The thing jerked him under, swimming downward through gauzy streamers of blood, deeper and deeper, until the blood was just a deeper shade of black, and the surface was only a pale, receding fantasy.

Just before he woke, lungs bursting with held-in breath, Thinwolf looked down at his hands and saw that they had become clockwork hooks, all gears and sprockets and dark-gleaming steel.

He stirred weakly in his bunk. His head pounded. Sleep no longer rested him, even when it came.

"Oh," he groaned. He rubbed at his eyes, clutched at his head.

At some point, Thinwolf noticed that some of the pounding was coming from outside his head. *Engines?* He glanced at his comm board; a light flashed, marking an attempted contact. He went on deck.

A vessel was moving slowly toward him, out of the rising sun. He squinted against the glare. The boat had an apple-cheeked trawler hull, high in the bows and low at the waist. He could barely make out dark figures in the wheelhouse.

"Hoy!" Someone with a sweet voice shouted across the water. "Aboard the squirtboat, hoy!"

The voice tugged him to the rail, stretched his face into an idiot grin. He smothered the inner whisper that warned: Remember what Coedi said. "Hoy," he answered.

The boat moved deliberately. As it slid away from the glare, he took in more details. The hull was of some scarred black plastic, the wheelhouse painted with red and gold stripes, now a bit scuffed and faded. The silhouette of the woman in the wheelhouse was slender and small. Two tall, angular men, wearing nothing but leather tool harnesses, stood in the prow, grinning. One tossed Thinwolf a line. Thinwolf's boat hummed and extruded a cushioned rubrail. "Oh, a *smart* squirtboat," the other man said. His tone was sly and gleeful.

As the vessels touched, another man came around the corner of the wheelhouse. After a moment, Thinwolf saw that the three were a cloneset. He looked closer, and saw the silver claws of control skeins at their necks. Slaves, he wondered, or did they freely indenture their volition? He shuddered.

The trawler's engines shut down with a clanking snort, and the captain descended from her wheelhouse.

She was young in body, older in the eyes, with a carefully braided mane of honey-colored hair. Her features were good — neat, perfectly regular. A sprinkling of tiny, sparkling freckles ornamented her cheeks. Her unisuit was elegantly cut, spotless. He could not imagine her in the role of lawless bonepicker. She regarded him without expression, while her slaves giggled and nudged each other. "Hello, company man," she said.

"Hello," he answered. He felt his smile fade and break up, leaving a foolish emptiness on his face.

"You don't answer your comm?"

"Turned off," he admitted.

He looked up, saw a feral shape across the gap between the two vessels.

"Risky in these waters," she said. "You're taking a chance, company man."

Her voice was sweet, but so emotionless that a little shudder touched his back. "How so?" he asked.

"Pirates," she said, and finally she smiled. Her teeth were rubies, faceted into sharp little shields.

He took a step away from the rail. "I'm not too worried," he said. "I wear a personal defense field."

"Thank you, company man," she said. One of the slaves produced an insulated boat hook. Before Thinwolf could dodge away, the slave had hooked him. The slave jerked, and Thinwolf tipped over the rail into the sea. His field sizzled, shorted out, and he floundered helpless in the space between the two hulls. He gasped, swallowed cold water. The dream came back to him, and he thought of the miles of black water below him, where he would soon drift forever. He flailed at the water, shouted wordlessly, tried to get a grip on his slick-sided boat. Had he ever thought himself reconciled to death? The thought was alien, incomprehensible.

While he struggled, the woman issued calm instructions to her clone-set. "Larry, you and Curly take the boat back to the nest. Moe will go with me on the squirtboat. You two stay alert: watch that port-engine pressure gauge; don't push her too hard. You break my boat, and I'll take it out of your hides for years!"

The hull rolled under Thinwolf's clawing hands, as the pirate and her slave boarded. "Wait," he cried. "Please. Wait." Their indifference was palpable, a weight pressing him into the black water. He heard her say something else in that sweet voice, as the two boats began to move apart.

A grinding, ripping sound came from the bows, followed by a ripe curse from the woman. Thinwolf heard a yelp of terror. A slave dropped into the water, floated motionless. Blue light flared. Thinwolf heard a scream, then a bony crunch. He looked up, saw a feral shape bound across the widening gap between the two vessels, too swiftly to be identified.

Two more brief screams rang out, then all was quiet. Thinwolf was treading water, waiting with a sort of bemused fatalism. The hulk ap-

peared at the pirate boat's rail. "A moment, John," it said. "I will have to throw you a line; I dare not enter the sea. I am too heavy to support myself for long."

A rope looped out and fell into Thinwolf's outstretched hands. The hulk pulled him in so rapidly that he almost lost his grip, but then he was standing on the pirate boat's deck.

The hulk steadied him with bloody metal hands. "You are all right, John?"

Thinwolf drew a deep breath. "Yes." He closed his eyes, savored the touch of the sun on his skin, the solidity of the deck beneath his feet. "Yes. Thank you." He marveled that the pleasure of survival could be so profound in one whose flesh was almost dead. But it was, it surely was.

One slave lay broken against the wheelhouse. The other hung headless from the bow pulpit, draining into the sea. Thinwolf noticed these things with an odd sense of detachment, as if he were watching a sensie tape, a fictitious adventure. "You were efficient," he said to the hulk.

"Thank you, John. Killing is a skill that I can pass on to you, when you give up your flesh. This body carries a number of intrinsic skills; did you not know?"

"No . . . no, I did not."

"Oh, yes. I can kill; I can cook; I can pilot an airboat; I can perform amusing sketches and pantomines; I can recite verse in a dozen human dialects and three alien ones; I am skilled in three different schools of massage and eighteen of the most advanced sexual modes; I can identify over nineteen thousand forms of rootknot nematodes native to Jaworld; I can tat fourteen hundred traditional doily patterns. . . ."

Thinwolf held up a hand. "Stop. I'm convinced of your qualities. Even if you could not walk and talk at the same time, I would be grateful." Thinwolf paused, continued in a low voice. "Though I'm unsure to whom I speak."

"I have no name; this is true." The hulk looked down and said no more.

"Perhaps you should have one. Choose one for yourself." Thinwolf looked across the water to his little boat, suddenly saw that it was drifting farther away by the moment. "My boat," he said.

The hulk looked up, surprise animating the noble features. "You have only to call it, John. It is imprinted with your voice, as I am."

Thinwolf called, and the boats drew together. His boat extended suction grapples, then a gangplank.

The straps that had secured the hulk were broken. The woman lay on the foredeck, her once-handsome face torn away. By the rail was a plasma weapon, half-sunk in a congealed puddle of melted decking.

"She tried to burn me, John, after I killed her brainslave. I'll clean up the mess."

"Let it wait a bit. Let's look below; perhaps we'll find treasure." Thinwolf felt no regret at the pirate's death; she had meant to drown him. He turned away, walked aft around the pirate boat's wheelhouse to the companionway.

In the hold they found odd beauty, looted from a dozen dying Cities. Against the forward bulkhead was a sculpture in patinaed bronze, depicting a group of squat, muscular humanoids wrestling with their own skins, like ugly four-limbed caterpillars, splitting open to reveal a superior form. Under the rugoses kins were hidden features, claws, the smooth edge of a wing, all washed with a greenish gold alloy. Thinwolf moved closer, reached out to the cold metal. Beneath his fingers the piece throbbed, as if with hidden struggle, and he jerked away.

There was a vast clockwork machine, in which the spokes of the wheels were attenuated alien bodies, the cogs edged with pleading hands, the levers unhuman bones. It spun at a touch, all the wheels whirling, cogs grinding, levers pumping. A grating music issued from a hundred hidden mouths. Thinwolf clutched a wheel, and it stopped.

The hulk watched, eyes somber, and offered no comment.

Thinwolf moved aft, no longer touching the objects. At the stern bulkhead, he found a great coldlight painting, in which figures moved slowly. It seemed at first to be an allegory, perhaps of an alien Hell. The torments seemed human enough: dismemberment, burning, flaying, pressing, freezing, immersion in disgusting substances; a rather ordinary range of pain and humiliation. But the creatures who walked entranced through these horrors were like two-legged deer, with great liquid eyes and expressions of saintly amusement.

"Enough," he said to the hulk.

Back on his own deck, he watched as the hulk threw the woman's body into the sea. The hulk brought a bucket to wash away the blood, bent to scrub at the stain with a deck brush. "What will you do with the other boat, John? Will you sink it?"

"What?" he asked, startled. "Why should I do that?"

"She may have allies, John. Better, perhaps, if they find nothing when they come to look for her."

Thinwolf thought about it, all that frightening beauty sinking deep into the blackness, all that bewildering meaning, stolen by pain and sweat from a dozen senile Cities, never to be seen again. He felt a pain in his heart that had nothing to do with the slow failure of that muscle. "No, let it float until someone finds it."

The hulk shrugged. "As you wish, John." When it was finished with the cleanup, it glanced at the place where it had been secured. "I will fetch new straps," it said, without visible resentment.

"Why? Oh. No, no, you're not deck cargo anymore." He felt the danger of his words as he spoke them, but he reassured himself. It was a machine; it performed its task as designed. Surely, when the time came for him to die, his desire to live would be more potent than his pity for the poor metal creature. Surely.

For the first time, the hulk smiled, though it was a small smile. "Thank you, John. You are a kind man."

Of course the hulk knew how to navigate the boat, so Thinwolf left it in the wheelhouse with instructions to call him if a City appeared. Thinwolf went below to change into dry clothing. His bunk drew him; he lay down and fell into a deep sleep, his first in days.

When he woke, the light that slanted from the porthole above his head was amber with the approaching sunset. The air was chill, and the sea was a cold, desolate gray. He dressed warmly, went on deck, to find the hulk steering tirelessly north.

"You slept well, John?"

"Yes. Yes, thank you. Anything happen, any problems?"

The hulk shook its beautiful head. "No, no problems, John. A line of thundershowers, a rainbow, a pair of nightdragons crossed our course. Nothing of any consequence."

Thinwolf looked at the hulk. It spoke calmly, but its eyes glowed; a small smile shaped its mouth — it seemed quite cheerful. "You've enjoyed your day, then?" he asked.

"Oh yes, John. For me, this is wonderful. The water shows so many different colors. I have seen seabirds, I have seen cloudcastles, and the nightdragons were lovely: crimson and gold and cerulean."

"But no Cities?"

"No, no Cities, John. Are you looking for any City in particular?"

What harm could it do to tell the hulk? "Yes. Legend says that a human City swims this world. It's my spirit quest. Do you understand?"

"What is a 'spirit quest'?"

Thinwolf made himself comfortable on the wheelhouse settee. "It's hard to explain. It may have meant something quite different, long ago, when my ancestors lived on Old Earth, but now . . . it's just the last thing a redskin looks for before he dies. It can be a place, a thing, a thought, a feeling. If the search has some meaning, if it has some last lesson to teach, all the better. That's something I won't find until the end, I suppose."

For a while the hulk said nothing. When it spoke, its voice was less joyful. "But you will not die, not truly. Still, you hope to find a lesson in this City?"

"Why not?" Thinwolf shrugged. "But it's the searching that's important, not the finding."

"Where do your people live now, John?"

Weakness washed through Thinwolf, a sensation that had little to do with his disease. "All gone now. I'm the last."

The sea darkened into night. The hulk stood at the wheel. For hours it steered silently, its arms jerking in small, precise movements. Thinwolf glanced back at their wake, glowing with cool white phosphorescence; it was straight as a string.

The hulk seemed to feel no need for conversation. Finally Thinwolf spoke. "Would you like to hear another story?"

The hulk shrugged, then spoke in neutral tones. "If it would please you to tell me."

Thinwolf was taken aback. "You were more enthusiastic when you were strapped to the foredeck."

The hulk said nothing, and after a moment, Thinwolf saw that his comment required no answer. "Let me put it another way. Would you mind if I told another story?"

"Not at all, John."

"Then this is the story of Coyote and the Happy Hunting Ground Development Corporation."

This was many years after the Time before Time, long after the People had left Old Earth and scattered to the Stars. Ten thousand years had passed,

and the People had gone so far and so fast that no one knew what tribe they belonged to anymore. No one knew their totem; no one knew their clan. In fact, the People no longer knew that they were the People. Even Coyote had forgotten his name and his function, as would any being who had lived as long as Coyote. Coyote now lived on Dilvermoon, that heartless steel world. He thought he was a historian; he pried into the private lives of dead people, and then wrote learned articles that no one ever read. He could afford to busy himself in this pointless manner because he was very, very rich, as anyone of even ordinary intelligence would be, were he as old as Coyote. And remember, Coyote is clever.

One day, as he was reviewing some dusty tapes from Old Earth, he came across the mention of a fascinating people, who were called, variously, Indians, or North Americans, or Amerinds, or redskins. They lived on great open plains, or deep forests, or murderous deserts, between soil and sky, and their lives seemed to possess a certain simple beauty. Apparently they spent their time killing various forms of wildlife in a charmingly pious manner, or riding their prairies and wastes and woodlands — sometimes on horses, sometimes in mighty-finned pink chariots — or attacking the supply trains of other migratory races, or selling off the mineral rights to their land with an admirably openhanded generosity. They lived in a variety of houses, from skin-covered lodges to log-and-mud huts to glass towers. Coyote thought that they must have had a strong grasp of the basic techniques of media manipulation, because few of the chroniclers spoke ill of them. This aroused his admiration, because, as you know, Coyote is a great and accomplished boaster.

Coyote put his other work aside, and plunged into this new study. The old stories called to him in a clear, strong voice. He found older stories, and became more entranced. Some of the stories even referred to a clever creature called Coyote. Coyote said to himself, "Now there was a fine fellow; what adventures he must have had if, as I suspect, he was a real person, clever and charismatic enough to be made a god by those primitive people."

Coyote became obsessed by the stories. Each new tale he dug from the Dilvermoon archives seemed a treasure, as simple and beautiful as a fine turquoise, clear blue truth veined with a golden net of hidden meaning. He neglected his usual pursuits: he forgot about the striving for status that his position required; he allowed carefully cultivated friendships to

lapse; he ignored his many lovers. Soon he acquired a reputation for uninteresting eccentricity. He did not notice.

One day in the archives, he discovered an ancient set of genetic topographs. The maps charted a number of individuals who claimed descent from the Amerind tribes of Old Earth. By cross-indexing, Coyote identified many structures that almost certainly derived from those ancient peoples. He compared these to his own topograph, and to his great pleasure, he discovered several correspondences. "No wonder I felt the strength of the old stories," Coyote said to himself. Coyote has always been a sentimental being. He found himself longing for the grassy plains, the sagebrush wastes, the dark forests of his lost People. "Perhaps," he said, "I should try to live as they did. Perhaps this would give me a stronger appreciation for the stories. Perhaps this would clear up several puzzling points."

His enthusiasm flared up brightly. Coyote is a being of great temporary passions — if few long-term loyalties. Still, his emotions are hotter than many a steadier being, often strong enough to sweep all practical considerations aside. He began to make plans to emigrate to an empty Earth-type planet, of which there were many in those days.

Using his great wealth, he purchased a long-term lease on a temperate continent, on a world called Treen.

He researched a thousand anthropological texts, winnowed through a bewildering variety of cultures. "Why," he said to himself, "should I limit myself to the narrow confines of one tribe's way of life? I'll pick and choose what I like. After all this time, it's the essence that matters, not the details."

Eventually he decided that he would live on his planet in this manner: his lodge would be built of skins and birch bark and vinyl siding; he would transport himself in a grav sled made to look like a dugout log; he would grow maize and dryland rice and yohimbé vine; he would prospect for soapstone and methane; he would dress himself in furs and copper armor; he would seek spirituality through the ingestion of peyote and rye whiskey; he would hunt with spear and Winchester the great horned pipefish that swam the rivers of his new world; he would build monuments to the lost gods of the People, using earthworks and carven trees and spray paint.

"Ah," he said. "What fine times I'll have, sitting by the sacred kerosene lantern, telling new stories of the People." And then he grew sad, remembering that no one would hear those stories.

Coyote is above all a schemer, and almost immediately a new plan came full-blown into the Trickster's mind. "I will find the People," he declared. "I will reunite the People!"

First he hired the best dreamer he could afford, to make a promotional sensie. She was not the best dreamer on Dilvermoon, of course; Coyote, while rich, was no starcluster emperor. Still, she was competent. Coyote sent the sensie out to as many worlds as he could locate on the Manichaeian Index, which was a great many. The sensie showed the vanished People living their simple lives, with the heaviest emphasis on the pleasures of real food, the heathful aspects of outdoor living, and imaginative and diverse sexual calisthenics. This last was Coyote's touch; an extrapolation based on the practice of squaw-swapping among the Inuit, a tribe of the far north.

"Come to the New Happy Hunting Ground," the sensie implored, using Coyote's face and voice. "Send your genetic topograph to the Happy Hunting Ground Development Corporation, Dilvermoon, for a free analysis. See if you are eligible to emigrate. What can you lose but a little time? Think of the rewards, if you are among the chosen few. Free transport to a Garden World, full support while establishing your tribe, thorough training in the old ways. All you must do is tell us, in a hundred words or less, why you would like to be part of the Grand Experiment!"

Queries flooded in, arriving in such numbers that Coyote was forced to set up a large organization to handle the flow.

In time the queries slowed down to a trickle and finally ceased. Coyote chose a thousand men and women; each possessed at least a drop of redskin blood. His major selection criterion was this: is this person miserable enough in his or her present circumstances to take a great risk?

Coyote is crafty, though not wise.

Coyote sent tickets and waited. Most of his choices came to Dilvermoon. He took tissue samples from each arrival. When he had enough, he took them to a famous soma builder.

"Make me a mate," Coyote said. "She must be a full-blood redskin, a beauty of her race, intelligent, resourceful, passionate but not too demanding — you know what I mean. You can cut and paste from these."

The famous soma builder took the tissue samples and the old topographs. He sighed. He made no guarantees and demanded a huge fee, which Coyote paid over with some reluctance. The project was beginning

to press him a little financially; he was cutting into capital, something he had sworn never to do.

When his mate was ready, Coyote was present at the de-vatting. She emerged, looked about with a rather dour expression. Coyote was somewhat taken aback. Somehow he had envisioned the People differently. In the sensie, everyone had been tall, clean-limbed, clear-skinned, sexy. His Indian bride was short, with heavy legs and muddy skin. Her eyes were small, her face round and flat, her black hair coarse.

"Well, of course, she's just out of the vat. She'll look better when she's had a little sun on her," he told himself.

Coyote took her moist hand in a tender clasp. "Greetings," he said. "Your name is Gray Dove. I'm your husband."

"I'm hungry," she said, in a whiny singsong.

Coyote could not repress a tiny shudder.

Thinwolf paused. His throat was dry, and he wished he could have a drink. The hulk turned its beautiful head to look at him. "This seems a different story, John. Different from the others you have told. Am I wrong?"

"No. No, you're not wrong." Thinwolf looked toward the black horizon and saw a flare of pink light. *Perhaps*, he thought, *a City is burning*. "How different?"

The hulk was silent for a while, as if it were considering the phrasing of its answer. "The other stories were like dreams. This seems more a remembrance." The hulk watched him with soft eyes. "Am I wrong?"

Thinwolf could not answer. After a bit he continued with the story.

COYOTE CHARTERED a great colony ship from SeedCorp and herded his new People aboard. Some went eagerly, some reluctantly, but almost all went, which encouraged Coyote. "I have chosen well," he said to himself. "The People will grow into a mighty nation on our new world." This was a reassuring thought, because Coyote had spent the last of his once-great wealth, buying supplies and teaching machines.

Another thought came to him: *Perhaps I will someday become the new Coyote to my People. I must think of famous deeds to do*. But he did not speak this thought aloud, for there is a limit to even Coyote's boastfulness.

On the ship during the passage to Treen, Coyote tried to become a friend to Gray Dove. During the first weeks, he took her to his bed every evening and made great efforts to give her pleasure. She submitted with tired sighs and impatient grunts; if she enjoyed the skillful ministrations of Coyote, she gave no sign. She had no great store of small talk. The minimal personality installed by the soma builder seemed to satisfy her; at least she made no efforts to develop it. She had revolting table manners.

After a time, Coyote desisted in his unrewarding efforts and found another companion among the newly recruited People: a slim, flame-haired woman with small, neat breasts, blue-white skin, and a hungry red mouth. Coyote expected resentment from Gray Dove, but she seemed uninterested. Freed of Coyote's attentions, Gray Dove spent even more time in the dining room, and by the time they orbited the new world, she had grown notably plump.

"What do you think will happen?" Thinwolf asked the hulk.

"I don't know, John. Your story has a texture of sadness. But perhaps I feel this because none of your other stories has ended well."

"Perhaps."

The People and their supplies ferried down from the colony ship, which then departed. Soon all was ready for the Great Experiment.

Coyote stood on a tall boulder; the People waited apprehensively. They were naked, and some shivered, though it was high summer. Coyote took no notice, began his speech. "You are the chosen People. This is your world. With your enthusiastic participation, under my guidance, you will come to belong to this world, as your ancestors belonged to theirs."

Someone spoke from the crowd. "Where do we sleep?"

Coyote was a bit taken aback by the tone of the question. He indicated the huge heap of crates. "In there you will find temporary lodges. You have only to find them and erect them; then you will be as comfortable . . . no, *more* comfortable than your ancestors ever were. Later we'll build more substantial dwellings."

"What do we eat?"

Coyote frowned. He sensed an unproductive passivity among the People. "The land will provide," he said. "We will begin lessons on basic hunting and gathering in the morning. Meanwhile, I will issue temporary rations."

"Why did we have to leave our clothes on the ship?"

Coyote sighed. "All this was explained on the orientation sensie, issued to everyone on boarding the ship. Did you play it? Never mind; I will explain. Over there in the crates are appropriate garments, suited to our new life. We are the People reborn; we must look the part."

The People seemed uneasy; they drew together and asked no more questions. Coyote sighed. "Well. Here is a more pleasant prospect. We must all choose new names, names appropriate to our new lives. You all must consider carefully how you wish to be called. I've chosen my new name, after much thought. Henceforth, I will be known as John Coyote."

Thinwolf felt a terrible weakness steal over him, so that he slumped in the settee and could not continue his story. His breath came to him with difficulty; his head was filled with a painful pressure; his hands trembled. He supposed that his disease was entering a new phase, and he was frightened.

The hulk engaged the autopilot and knelt beside him. "John? Can I help?" Thinwolf shook his head. Not yet, he thought.

"I'll take you to your bunk," the hulk said, and lifted him gently. "You can finish your story in the morning. Though I can guess what happened."

In the morning, Thinwolf could not rise from his bunk; he was too weak. He cried out, a wordless, despairing sound that shocked and frightened him. This is the sound of dying, he thought. He heard the clang of metal feet on the companionway ladder, and the hulk was there, looking down at him.

"John?"

"I can't get up," Thinwolf whispered, looking down at his traitor body.

"I will help you." But when the hulk lifted him to his feet, Thinwolf's legs would not support him. "We will go to the med unit, John," the hulk said.

The med unit examined him, its delicate probes touching his skin like so many icy feathers. He had barely enough strength left to shudder. When it was done, the med unit produced a grav chair. "Henceforth you must remain in the chair, if you wish to retain mobility." The med unit's voice was precise, pleasant, unemotional — even when Thinwolf shouted curses at it. He struck at it with feeble hands, but was restrained by the hulk, which clamped his hands in a powerful, careful grip.

Thinwolf looked up at it, astonished. "What are you doing?"

"You will need this device. John. If you damage it, you will suffer."

Rage replaced terror, and Thinwolf bared his teeth at the hulk. "Perhaps I won't need it at all; perhaps I'll simply take to my lifeboat now!"

The hulk dropped its gaze and released Thinwolf's hands. "As you wish, John." It turned, uncovered the switch access plate in its side, waited with its head turned to the side. By the access, a handprint lit with a soft green glow, and a message flashed: THROW SWITCH — PRESS HERE.

Thinwolf reached out, fingered the twist of soft wire that secured the switch. His hand looked thin and pale, the skin translucent over the bones. Something invaded him, pushed out the rage, so that in an instant he could feel nothing but a deep regret. The flesh was so precious, and so fragile. He would cling to it as long as he safely could.

"No, I'm sorry. I've acted badly," Thinwolf said. "I won't need your body yet."

The hulk looked at him tenderly, smiled, refastened its access plate. "I am pleased, John. Do not assume that I fear erasure; I do not. That is my destiny. I will go without regret when the time comes; that is how I am made. Still, I can enjoy whatever comes, until you are ready."

Thinwolf shook his head. He would never understand; how could anything give up its life so easily? "I'm reassured. I owe you much already, and soon . . . I'll owe you everything."

"I am only a machine, John. Never forget this."

"Still. . . . Well, have you given thought to a name?"

"Yes. I would like to join your tribe, John. Is that possible?"

Thinwolf laughed, a somewhat sour sound. "Why not?"

The hulk took no notice. "May I be called Ironhorse, then?"

"Good. A good redskin name. May I ask why you chose it?"

Ironhorse looked at Thinwolf with cautious eyes. "Is it not obvious?"

"I suppose." He sat silently in the grav chair for a long time, trying to get used to the idea that his own legs would never bear him again. Ironhorse watched him patiently. Finally it spoke. "Would you like to finish your story, John?"

"I thought you didn't like my stories?"

"But this one is true, is it not?"

"They're all true. But yes, yes," Thinwolf said, waving his hand in weary acquiescence. "Yes, this one is true; it happened to me."

Ironhorse said nothing, nor did the hulk look surprised. *Perhaps it was*

incapable of surprise, Thinwolf thought. "You don't seem astounded."

"No."

Thinwolf felt a twinge of irritation. "Then I'll be brief."

"The 'Great Experiment' was a failure. My 'People' were no better than they should have been. They moped about for weeks and months, eating freeze-dried rations and courting each other and whispering against me. They hated the lodges; they hated the buckskin I gave them; they refused to learn to hunt, or gather, or play the tom-tom. They said the music was boring and childish, 'a lot of grunting and mumbling and no tunes.' Well, I had to agree with them about the music, but that didn't make them any happier. The only thing they seemed to enjoy was sitting around the bonfire and drinking whiskey and screwing. All the peyote rotted, except for what I used.

"It was a disaster. The food was running out, the lodges were falling down, and they weren't Indians, not at all, not in any way. They didn't like my stories any better than you do, and what could I do?

"I sat in my lodge and brooded. I was broke. I had no people; I was alone. The red-haired woman left me and moved in with Gray Dove and her three husbands. They all refused to learn anything about their ancestors and the way those wonderful people had once lived.

"Finally I got mad. I climbed up on the tall boulder and shouted for them to assemble. After a while a dozen or so ambled up from the encampment and stood about, grinning foolishly.

"'Listen,' I said. 'I've been good-natured for a pretty good while. I've allowed you to indulge your civilized lusts; I've waited patiently for you to see the emptiness of your civilized lives and return to the old ways. But you haven't. You've disappointed me. You're not the People. Good-bye.'

"I climbed down from the speaking rock and went to the supply dump. I'd taken the precaution of hiding a one-man escape pod in a big crate. I pried open the crate, got in the pod, and lifted away from Treen. I've never been back."

Ironhorse stirred, looked sadly at Thinwolf. "What happened, John?"

Thinwolf's fingers twisted together. "I never meant for anyone to suffer. I thought if I left them on their own, they'd have to learn to be redskins. There were plenty of sensie tapes in the teaching machines; there should have been no problem."

"But?"

"An erroneous protein survey. Just a small incompatibility. It's happened a thousand times before on a thousand worlds. Anyway, when the food ran out and they had to begin hunting, they discovered the problem. A lot of people died before they started storing the dead in ice caves and using the flesh to supplement their diet. Then they died more slowly. There were fewer than a hundred left, when the missionary ship arrived and took them off. Saved by missionaries! Does that tell you how wrong the whole thing went? Hah! They've been hunting me ever since. I took the most anonymous job I could find; I stayed in space; I never went planetside; I made no friends." Thinwolf smiled a little. "But they got me anyway."

For a long time, the hulk said nothing. Finally it spoke. "I still wish to be of your tribe."

So Thinwolf was no longer the last redskin. They traveled north, into the latitudes of fogs and icebergs. The wind was like a knife, and the water like flowing ice, and whenever Thinwolf rode his grav chair up on deck, he wrapped himself in heavy robes.

At night he would tell stories to the hulk, and Ironhorse would listen patiently: Coyote and the Rain Barrel of Souls, Coyote and the General's Manboots, Coyote and the World of Ashes, Coyote and the Rainbow Guitar, Coyote and the Most Beautiful Toadwoman, Coyote and the Steel Raven . . . and many others. The stories seemed to flow from Thinwolf like blood from a wound, at first pulsing and hot, later seeping slowly, clotted by his approaching death. The stories eased Thinwolf somehow, so that he was less conscious of the decline of his body. He could barely move now, and the pain came oozing back, no longer kept completely under control by the med unit's injections.

They went too far north for safety; a dozen times a night the ice-floe alarm shrilled, waking Thinwolf from his almost-sleep.

The hulk approached him. "John, perhaps we should alter course. The ice is too thick; we risk being trapped."

Thinwolf stirred in his chair. The world had closed in around him; it seemed to press him inward, into his failing flesh, gently but inexorably. Ironhorse's beautiful face swam before him, unclear. He forced himself to focus, to listen, to think.

"Yes," he said, after long struggle. "Alter course. Zigzag southwest; per-

haps we'll cut its trail that way. Unless it swims under the ice."

There were fewer Cities in the high latitudes. But they came across one living City and one dead one.

The living City was low and sleek, with a great rounded carapace, set with a thousand bright domes of colored glass, like a gigantic steel turtle studded with glowing jewels. It forged across their course at high speed, plowing a deep furrow in the ocean.

"Shall we chase it?" Ironhorse asked.

"No," answered Thinwolf, sunk in his chair.

The dead City rose over the horizon a day later, at sunset. It had once been beautiful, and even in its decay, half-sinking in the cold waters, it still had a bittersweet charm, like an abandoned amusement park. It was a confection of pavilions and terraces and small, intimate courts full of empty flower boxes, all connected by a maze of narrow waterways. The hulk steered the boat slowly through the canals and lagoons, into the interior of the City, and Thinwolf roused himself from his terminal languor to marvel. "They must have lived well," he said to Ironhorse. "Graciously."

They drifted past a faded mural, cleverly made from tiny chips of glass. It showed a group of the City's long-dead inhabitants bathing in a sunny blue pool. The aliens had long, smooth legs, startlingly human in shape; four stumpy, powerful arms; and a pair of bony crests on their hairless heads. Their skin was a metallic viridian. They showed no recognizable sexual characteristics. They posed carefully, in a composition that spoke to Thinwolf of ease and comfort and contentment.

That night they rested in an inner lagoon of the dead City, moored to an elaborately carved post that angled from the still water. Age had obscured the carving, but to Thinwolf, it looked like a winged fish, rough-scaled, with voluminous trailing fins.

The cold wind shrieked above, tearing through the broken pavilions, but in the lagoon the air rested. The boat lay quietly for the first time in weeks, though the world still swayed and rolled for Thinwolf. His chair meandered from side to side, as he crossed the deck to where the hulk stood, looking off into the dark City.

"Ironhorse," Thinwolf said.

The hulk turned, though Thinwolf's voice was hardly more than a gasp. "John. How are you feeling?"

"Very little worse, actually," Thinwolf said, as though that were a reason

to be cheerful. He felt close to death, but his mind seemed clear. "Tell me. What do you ponder, so deeply?"

The hulk smiled, an expression Thinwolf no longer found remarkable. "Nothing too deep, John. But will you tell me something? Those stories you told me, about Coyote — I do not mean the one that happened to you — did you make them up?"

Thinwolf rotated his chair, so that he faced the eroded flying fish. "In a way."

"Yes?"

"Coyote was a mythmaker. I never learned the true stories; not by heart. When I was a historian, I tried never to learn anything I could look up. Why waste memory on trivia? But I knew the sense of them, so I could tell them in my own words. That's how myths are grown."

"I see. Would it be proper, then, for me to tell a story? Since I am a member of your tribe now." The hulk's eyes shone with entreaty.

Thinwolf had believed that his capacity for astonishment had dried up along with his life; it had not. "But you've never heard the true stories."

"Perhaps you have not, either. In any case, I know many stories that seem true to me, and I do have the capacity to dream."

"Truly?"

"If I did not, then you would be unable to dream, after you transfer."

After a time, Thinwolf nodded.

"You are kind," said Ironhorse. "But first we should go below, where you can be more comfortable."

In the salon the hulk touched a hidden switch, and a simulated campfire appeared on the cabin sole, burning with a low glow. Thinwolf could feel the heat through the robes that covered him. "Better," he said. When first the hulk had shown him the fire, he had been amused, but Ironhorse had pointed out that the people of Jaworld had their own pastoral tradition.

The hulk squatted before the fire. It was silent for a long time, as if ordering its thoughts.

Thinwolf lost himself in the fire's red reflections. When finally Ironhorse spoke, Thinwolf jumped, and his heart hesitated for a moment before resuming its slow, tired beat. "This is the story of Coyote and the Chicken House of Death," said Ironhorse.

Long ago, in the Time before Time, Coyote withdrew from the affairs of

the People for a time. Coyote did not wish to do this, but his reputation as a meddler and trickster had become so widespread that no one would listen to him anymore, or pay any attention to him. He felt crippled and deserted and less than himself.

Finally, when his hurt became greater than his love for the People, he made a decision. "If the People have decided to forget me, then I will forget them." He bought passage to a faraway system, and began to make a new life for himself.

For all Coyote's flaws, no one could ever accuse him of being weak-willed. When he decided to forget the People, he made a good job of it. He went to mindwash parlors and skullpickers, though these were of limited help, since Coyote did not wish to forget *everything*. He studied vastly, filling his mind with trivial knowledge, so as to leave less room for his memories of the People. Finally he went out adventuring, for adventurous memories are the strongest of all. He succeeded in purging the People from his mind, eventually. But by then the adventuring had become a habit, and since he could no longer remember why he had begun, he did not know why he should stop.

After many years, Coyote found himself on a new world. It seemed a good world, with a breathable atmosphere and temperate continents, and a well-adapted Terran ecosphere. Great palaces lay scattered over the mountains and forests and fields, but they were all empty and silent and full of bones.

Coyote was puzzled by this mystery. He explored the palaces, and each was more magnificent than the last. Coyote found more treasures than he could ever have carried away. The palaces were of the finest fully automated variety, and they treated him with perfect courtesy, offering him food and wine and soft beds. The only thing they could not do was tell him what had killed their owners.

Coyote has always loved comfort, so he spent a great deal of time in each palace, enjoying the amenities. But each palace was much like the last one, varying only in detail, so that Coyote eventually grew bored. Searching for novelty, he discovered that behind each palace was what appeared to be an empty chicken house. He made his way, through weeds and rusty wire, to one of these and went inside.

It was a magnificent chicken house, built of marble and tile, with gold-plated feed hoppers and silver curlicues supporting the roosts. But there

was nothing inside but some broken shells and the smell of death.

The most impressive palace was high on the shoulder of a mighty snowcapped mountain. Coyote visited this palace just before he planned to lift away from the world, saving the best for last.

Though cold winds shouted around the walls and towers and courts, the palace was still warm inside with the presence of its vanished inhabitants, as if they had departed just the hour before Coyote's arrival. A soup still steamed in the palace kitchen, hidden music played in the throne room, mops lay abandoned in the gleaming halls, and when Coyote went into the bedroom of the First Lady of the palace, the bed was still fragrant with the scent of her body.

Unlike all the other palaces, this one contained no bones.

Coyote cursed. "Had I been a little quicker, the mystery would be solved." He never considered that the fate that had overtaken the palace dwellers might have carried him away; Coyote still believed that he would live forever.

Coyote went out to the chicken house behind this palace, and saw that it was the most beautiful chicken house of all. The feeders were heavy gold, the fixtures platinum, and each roost was set into a niche backed by a large, round stained-glass window. Here also were broken shells, but the smell of death was absent.

Coyote looked at the window behind the first roost. It showed a great bird, high against a black sky that shook with its passage. The bird had a cruel beak and eyes of fire and feathers blue as turquoise. The image touched something in Coyote's damaged memory, and unexpectedly, a name came to him. "Thunderbird," he whispered. Beneath the roost lay a few fragments of shell, thick as pottery, marked with black-on-white patterns.

The next window showed another bird, this with long trailing wings, rising from a pillar of fire. The flame clung to the bird, and it seemed to shriek pain and ecstasy. "Phoenix," Coyote said. Only ashes lay beneath the roost.

The third window showed a mighty feathered serpent, coiled around a mountain that belched purple smoke into a green sky. One of the serpent's great wings lay across a vast golden trove; the other lay across a river of blood that washed the mountain's foot. "Quetzalcoatl!" The eggshells were gossamer-thin, as if made of the most delicate gold leaf.

The last roost's window was a mirror, dark and cloudy. Coyote saw himself dimly — a gaunt, handsome man with glittering eyes — and he told himself that he was no less a magnificent sight. He almost did not notice the small black egg that lay in the nesting box, cradled in red velvet, but a sound drew his attention, a scratching click. He looked down and saw that a web of cracks was spreading across the smooth surface of the egg.

A terrible fear clutched at his heart, but it was too late. Now I know why the palace dwellers fled, he thought in that instant. Death was hatching, but slowly enough, here, that they could run away. He looked up at the mirror, and saw an image emerging from the blackness. A tattered, dull-eyed Raven scratched at a fresh grave.

The black egg fell open, and Death swirled out, thick and choking, and took Coyote away for a thousand thousand years.

AND THAT is the story of Coyote and the Chicken House of Death," said Ironhorse. It watched Thinwolf with anxious eyes. Thinwolf stirred. "Well," he said. "That's interesting."

"Did you think so, truly?"

"Yes. Though your story asked more questions than it answered. For

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example, what was the nature of the bargain the palace dwellers made? With whom did they make it? And why would they incubate death?"

The hulk looked away. "All living things incubate death within themselves."

"I suppose," Thinwolf said. "I suppose. Well, not a bad story, for a beginner. You're a redskin, Ironhorse; who could doubt it?"

The hulk's beautiful eyes glowed, and it smiled, exposing strong steel teeth. "Thank you, John."

Thinwolf nodded, drifted away again on the tides of his coming death.

That night, Thinwolf dreamed the last dream. He paddled a canoe, a graceful and beautiful vessel, made of silvery bark and laced with yellow roots, as light on the water as a thought. The sky was a flawless blue bowl, the sun a blazing jewel, the sea a green mirror. He paddled strongly, and the canoe slid across the sea swiftly, toward a destination that he did not think about, but which he knew would bring him some great reward.

The dream shifted, with the smooth perfection of dreams, so that he looked up at the high walls of a City, unaware that anything had changed.

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He laid his paddle across his knees. The City turned, or perhaps the current moved him, but the effect was of a great turntable, revolving so as to display some glittering treasure. His heart thumped with excitement, and the walls of the City spun past, until the Gate of Faces came into view. The City stopped spinning, or the current ceased — and all was motionless.

The Gate was closed.

The Gate's facade was glorious. A thousand faces pushed from its golden surface, and Thinwolf knew them all. At the top were many faces he could not put a name to, but he *knew* them. They lived in the distant halls of his early memory; they were people who had once meant something to him.

Halfway down, the faces were more familiar, and their names tickled at his mouth, so that he wanted to greet them, even though their eyes were blank, looking far away.

Closest to him, at the bottom of the Gate, dipping into the sea with the slow swell, were the faces that he remembered best. His colleagues on Dilvermoon. The flame-haired woman with the sweet breasts. Gray Dove and the others of the People.

At the very bottom was the beautiful face of the hulk, smiling, streaming with the sea's cold water. Out of all of them, only the hulk's eyes were alive. The hulk's eyes, warm with recognition, fixed on Thinwolf, and Thinwolf felt a twinge of sorrow shoot through him, sharp as a knife.

The dream went dark, as though a shade had been drawn across the sun. A cold wind whipped the sea into tumbling white. The Gate made a hideous screeching sound and started to open. Thinwolf would have paddled away, but the dream had frozen him into immobility, locked him into some relentless event. The opening Gate sucked him forward, through the sea's violence. He looked down at the canoe. The silvery bark was going black with mildew; the lacings were fraying; the seams beginning to weep. The paddle withered in his hands and fell into dusty fragments.

He could see nothing but darkness within. He wanted to scream, but he could not. The disintegrating canoe shot through the Gate, and he saw the awful thing within, the thing he feared to see — the back of the Gate, where a thousand headless skeletons hung. The Gate closed behind him. The movement dislodged many of the bones, which rained down on him, shattering the canoe, pushing him beneath the black water. His mouth filled, his lungs filled, and he floated downward, unable even to struggle.

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Thinwolf woke, choking, his lungs full of fluid. His breath rattled in his rib cage, trying to get out. I'm dying, he thought, and the emotion that filled him was amazement.

The hulk was there, offering its terminal switch, its head turned away so that Thinwolf saw only the noble profile. On the hulk's sleek side, the transfer palmpoint glowed a cool, pure white, beckoning him toward life. Thinwolf reached out, hand shaking.

Before he quite touched the palmpoint, his hand paused, then clenched into a stubborn fist. He said his last word.

Some weeks later Coedi Kimpt watched the little squirtboat sweep into the lagoon. It docked with John Thinwolf's longhauler, and a massive figure emerged into the sunlight.

Coedi waved. "You look healthier, John," he shouted.

The hulk looked at him with a stranger's face, and Coedi grew uneasy. "That is you, isn't it? Did you find the Gate of Faces?"

For a moment the hulk gazed at him with wide, alien eyes. When it spoke, Coedi understood that something had gone wrong. "I believe he did," the hulk said.

Then the hulk entered the ship and lifted away.

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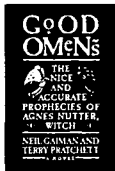
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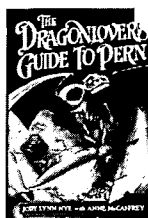
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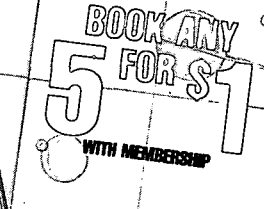
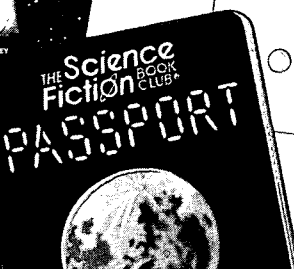
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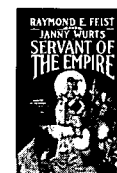
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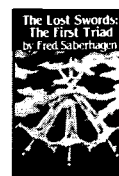
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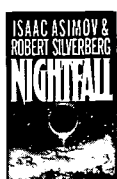
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